

A woman with dark hair styled in an updo, wearing a white lace dress, is shown from the chest up. She is looking upwards with her head tilted back, and her right hand is raised towards a shower of falling white petals. The background is a dense field of white blossoms, likely cherry blossoms, with sunlight filtering through the branches.

FELICIA GREENE

THE UNMARRIAGEABLES: **BOOK TWO**

A READER
for the Rogue

by Felicia Greene

They really did look like newly-weds, despite a year having passed since the wedding. Bertha Napp, leaning surreptitiously against the wall at the very back of the ballroom, smiled at her friend Arabella Haligon as she danced with her husband. The ballroom was bright with admiration of the couple, every guest unable to deny the sheer rightness of the match despite the unusual circumstances that had preceded it.

‘Don’t they look wonderful?’ Grace, leaning next to her, sipped from her glass of champagne. ‘It’s awful.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘Oh, it is. Arabella would say the same thing herself. She’s said it before.’

‘In jest.’

‘And who says I wasn’t speaking in jest?’ Grace paused, taking a larger sip. ‘She’s as aware as anyone else that her marriage was less likely than a lightning strike.’

‘I’d say considerably rarer.’

‘Of course, now the gentlemen of the ton think we did it

deliberately.'

'Oh, come now. They can't.'

This was a discomfiting thought. The idea that she and her friends had gone to all the trouble of declaring their permanently unmarried status to the world at large, risked and suffered an incalculable loss of status, mercy and goodwill, all as a cunning tactic to end up married anyway? No sensible gentleman could possibly think that. But then, Bertha was fairly sure that the ratio of sensible gentlemen to fools when it came to the ton was sadly out of balance.

'Do you still have the letter?'

'Of course I do.' She'd cut it out of the *Mayfair Herald* on the day it was printed, sticking it carefully on a piece of paper as her parents had raged at her. Her father had struck her so hard that—but no, she wasn't going to think of her parents at this beautiful ball, this event that was supposed to be happy. 'I still look at it sometimes.'

'So do I. A way of steeling myself for future difficulties, I think.'

'We've already declared to the ton that we'll be unmarried for life. Our full names were at the bottom of that letter. I think the biggest difficulty has already been overcome.'

'I know Rose has it on her wall in Bath. She's lucky her uncle is so sympathetic to her plight.'

'And Susan?'

'I've written dozens of letters, but the ones she writes back sound as if someone was looking over her shoulder while she wrote them.' Grace sighed. 'Her father, most likely.'

'She'll outwit him. She's stronger than any of us.'

'I know. But we're all strong, really. Stronger than the women we used to be, fluttering in corners about whether some utterly unimportant gentleman had looked at us during a dance.' Grace snorted. 'Let us be strong enough to leave this subject behind, and spend the evening finding interesting people to talk to.'

'In truth, I was going to escape to the library and read.'

'Of course.' Grace laughed. 'No doubt you have manuscript notes that you wish to labour over.'

'I do have some.' She always did. The crumpled piece of paper in her reticule covered in notes concerning her book—her book and hers alone, conjured up out of nothing, still a miracle when she looked at it—was her ever-present task when she had a spare moment. 'However, I really did wish to read.'

'Of course you did. You've never found a real thing as interesting as a fantasy.'

As kindly as the phrase sounded, Bertha blinked as a sting of hurt made itself felt. 'I suppose. One of my largest flaws.'

'I didn't mean it as a flaw. You have the courage to imagine better,

and the will to leave an unsatisfying world behind.’ Grace gently squeezed her shoulder. ‘That’s all I meant.’

‘Thank you. As a writer, I can officially say that’s a very nice way of putting it.’

‘And as a painter, I can tell you that your dress is lovely tonight.’

‘It’s nearly three years old and it shows. My mother said that as I’ve removed myself from the marriage market, there’s no point buying me new gowns.’

‘Are there really no aunts or cousins you can stay with, dear? No kindly relatives?’

‘Oddly enough, my parents are on good terms with precisely no-one in our family.’ Bertha tried to laugh, but failed. ‘But then, this was never a condition of writing the letter. I knew they wouldn’t throw me out onto the street, and they haven’t.’

‘It still doesn’t seem like any way to live.’

‘It isn’t. But I don’t live there—not really. I live in my book, and other people’s books.’

‘I hope it can sustain you until a more liveable situation presents itself. You can always come to the castle.’

‘And interrupt your painting? Absolutely not.’ Bertha folded her arms, hoping the gesture’s meaning was clear to Grace. *No more of this talk.* ‘I am quite well.’

‘You could never be anything else, dear.’ The sympathy in Grace’s voice was light, but warmed Bertha’s heart all the same. ‘Now go and read, before you’re pulled into the next dance.’

Bertha nodded gratefully, managing to summon up a smile as she headed for the door. By the time she turned back, Grace was swallowed up in the crowd: a crowd of ladies and gentlemen who never did anything apart from what they were told, living safe, dull lives, and still inexplicably managed to be happy.

That wasn’t her life, and it never would be. Better the cruelty of her parents and the uncertainty of a single life if it meant being able to do what she truly loved—read, and write. Yes, Arabella had got married after putting her name to that letter, but that had been a fluke. One unlikely to occur a second time.

Thank God she had her friends. Arabella, Grace, Susan and Rose made things bearable. Bertha sighed as she stepped over the threshold into the corridor, leaving the dancing behind.

A little time spent reading was needed. Possibly a lot of time. Enough time for all of these tiresome people with their tiresomely happy lives to go away, leaving only herself and her fellow Unmarriageables for a quiet glass of wine before she was forced to go home.

She walked as slowly as she could down the corridor that led to

the library, trying not to look as if she was running away from anything. As she wandered past the elaborately patterned porcelain vases and gleaming silver candlesticks that the Marton Estate had only recently acquired, making the property look far more beautiful than it had been, something vaguely unusual caught her eye.

A lady was wandering through the same corridor as herself. At the moment she was leaning against the golden-yellow curtains by the largest window, arms folded, trying not to look nervous and completely failing at the task. Bertha tried not to look at her, but her eyes were nonetheless drawn to the woman's very low neckline and great air of expectation.

An assignation, then. A secret meeting. Her writer's brain was already at work; this was the last chance the lady would ever have to see her lover before he was sent to spy for the Crown, or hunt down pirates, or something else similarly dashing and impetuous. That was why her nails were bitten at the edges, her eyes slightly red—perhaps from weeping? Or was it simply exhaustion, sleepless nights at the thought of her lover going so far away...

'Excuse me.' The lady's voice was a curious combination of genteel and deeply suspicious. Bertha blinked; she hadn't expected to be a part of any intrigue. 'Could you tell me where the library is?'

Oh, no. Imagining the lovers meeting in some distant part of the house was one thing, but having them whispering romantic nothings to one another while she was trying to read would be irritating in the extreme. She wouldn't be able to concentrate at all. Bertha bit her lip, briefly agonised with indecision. She didn't wish to mislead the lady, but neither did she wish to be disturbed in the middle of—

'Oh, for goodness' sake.' The lady sighed, her tone suddenly becoming both whining and snappish. 'Do you know, or not?'

Rudeness was nearly always understandable, but almost never excusable. Bertha would probably have been able to forgive such rudeness had she not already had to manage the impoliteness of her parents and the general loneliness of being at a ball, but circumstances had conspired to make forgiveness impossible.

'I do know.' She smiled sweetly at the lady, who at least had the good sense to look slightly chastened. 'I'm afraid you're in completely the wrong corridor. If you go back to the large blue vase and turn left, then walk past seven doors, the eighth will be the library.'

'I thank you.' The lady paused. 'And forgive me for my tone. I am so terribly—'

'Yes.' Bertha tried to smile, but knew it looked cold. The lady deserved a little coldness, despite her apology. 'Of course.'

With a resigned look, and a bob that bordered on a curtsy but didn't quite manage it, the lady turned away and practically ran down

the corridor. Bertha watched her go, hoping the lady was panicked enough to mistake the duke of Marton's large and well-appointed study for a library, wondering not for the first time just what invisible malady clung to her that made people treat her poorly at first glance.

Was she ugly? Not especially so. She was too plump, and had a tendency to be ruddy and healthy in the cheeks when the fashion was to look consumptive, but those weren't necessarily things that prevented one from being treated with dignity. Neither was she stupid, although she was sometimes slow in conversation due to thinking about something more interesting. The only thing that could explain it, beyond sheer rudeness on the part of many in the ton, was the fact that she had publicly proclaimed to all and sundry that she would remain unmarried.

Being unmarried meant being treated as lesser. Less important, less intelligent... less. And while Bertha could endure it for the vast majority of her day, when she was nose deep in her manuscript or reading her way through a surfeit of new authors, interactions with those less inclined to understand her motives left her feeling deeply gloomy.

At least she would be left alone in the library. When the enterprising gentleman who had made the assignation came to find his lady love, he wouldn't be detained by Bertha. She would tell him that his chosen woman was currently languishing in the study, waiting for him, and then be able to sink into her book with the happy expectation of not having to resurface for some hours.

She sighed as she opened the door to the library. She had loved this room ever since Arabella had showed it to her during their first tour of the Marton estate. Arabella had glowed, every inch the duchess, but had taken second place compared to the magnificence of the reading space. These high shelves, these gleaming leather-bound tomes... for a library like this, perhaps it would be worth the trouble, expense and eventual melancholy of getting married.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Bertha made a beeline for her favourite chair, a plain but serviceable piece of furniture that had quickly been christened Bertha's Chair by Arabella and the other Unmarriageables. On the shelf, to her great relief, was the book she had been reading the last time she'd spent hours in this particular library; a somewhat rushed and breathless account of a voyage undertaken in the South Seas.

Perfect inspiration for her manuscript. A perfect way to escape, if only for a little while, from her life—her life, which day by day became more confusing and bleak no matter how bravely she bore against the current. Opening the book, sinking into her chair, Bertha felt the first glimmerings of true peace.

An encounter that will surpass even your wildest dreams of carnal pleasure.

Benedict Harrow looked down at the visiting card in his hand. He'd been holding it ever since he'd arrived at the Marton Estate, possibly gripping it a bit too tightly; it was wrinkled now, important information vanishing into the creases in the paper. Still, he already knew all of the necessary facts—he'd learned them by heart. Rakes with as much natural talent and experience as himself quickly learned to hold a great quantity of information in one's head: a lady's address, her favourite scent, the time her husband usually came home. This, given to him at his favourite pleasure club by a smiling lady wearing nothing but a brace of peacock feathers, had been relatively simple to remember.

He'd been matched with a lady of similar standing and wealth, as well as a like-minded need for pleasure. Without knowing her name, they would meet in a predetermined location on this very estate—and presumably fall upon one another like wild beasts.

An elegant idea. He'd certainly enjoyed the thought of it at the pleasure club, but that could have been because he was so thoroughly drunk that he would have considered any thought elegant. Still, he could appreciate its merits even now, as he stood quietly in a corner of the glittering ballroom and drank a glass of champagne.

He could appreciate its merits in theory. In practice, Benedict had to admit, the idea was losing its appeal by the minute.

'Harrow! You reprobate.' Roger Waters, a red-headed young man who assumed a level of familiarity with everyone that bordered on insulting, smiled as he approached. Benedict summoned up an answering smile, wishing that he'd been left alone; if he was to meet this unnamed woman, he would need to find the library soon enough. Not that he'd ever found libraries particularly erotic—perhaps the lady had chosen it, or the functionaries responsible for organising these rather expensive encounters. 'I didn't know you knew Marton.'

'I don't. Well—I know him in passing.' Benedict had met His Grace the Duke of Marton precisely once. Given that Marton's set were the staid rule-followers of the ton as opposed to Benedict's own group of scandalous, half-drunk rabble-rousers, they hadn't managed to strike up a friendship. 'As usual, my money has secured an invitation rather than my other qualities.'

'If you keep drinking as much brandy as you did two nights ago at

the Orpheus, you won't even have that!

That was one of those comments that didn't endear Roger to anyone around him. Benedict made another, stronger effort to smile, wondering how he'd become a focal point for such unpleasant people. It made one think quite hard about choices made in the past. 'What a wit you're becoming.'

'This gathering needs a wit.' Roger stopped, suppressing a belch; Benedict fought the urge to simply walk away. Had he really been like this man at his age? 'I've never seen so many people without even the slightest sense of fun.'

'It's the Marton Estate. Not a gaming hell.'

'He's a strange one. Marton, I mean.' Roger spoke of the duke as if they were of the same standing; Benedict inwardly winced. He'd been disrespectful of authority as a youth, as was the fashion, but it was dangerous to continue the habit once one was over twenty-five. But then, he'd managed to maintain all of his other dangerous habits. 'I thought he was the dumbest man in the ton. And then he goes and marries that—'

'Be careful.' The words slipped out without thought. There was probably no chance that Roger would be overheard, given that the duke and his wife were dancing at the other end of the room, but still. 'You're in their house.'

'Oh, Harrow.' Roger rolled his eyes. Benedict gripped his wine glass, praying for strength. 'I don't think I'm the first person to say that his wife is the last person we ever would have chosen to marry him.'

'I really wouldn't know.'

'Writing that letter to the papers.'

'I don't remember what you're talking about, and I don't wish to be reminded. I truly don't.'

'You're getting old, Harrow. And I think his wife was bloody cunning about it. He never would have noticed her otherwise—they were all frightful. Ugly and graceless.'

'Stop.' Roger had just crossed the line from almost unpleasant to unforgivably so. Benedict didn't know whether he was angry or relieved. 'Now.'

Thankfully, Roger stopped. His sulky look of displeasure was almost as bad as his words. 'You're getting dull, Harrow, as well as old.'

'Once again, this is a normal gathering. I don't know what you expect me to do to liven things up.'

'You used to be fun. You once brought a sheep into the hell.'

'That I did.' What a stupid idea. Another thing that sounded wonderful in theory but completely failed to enliven him in practice;

it had been chaos, sheep shit everywhere, gentlemen throwing cards on the floor and stamping their feet. It had been far more boring than a normal night at the hell, if he were honest with himself.

‘Are you ill?’

‘No. But I am required elsewhere.’ Benedict fixed Roger with his famous smile, hoping it would soften any hard feelings while still carrying authoritative weight. ‘Try to enjoy yourself this evening.’

‘I won’t. My cousin brought me, and she’ll expect me to smile at all of her awful friends and make polite comments about the weather.’

‘Consider it medicine. It’ll do you good.’ *And keep you out of my way.* ‘Until we meet again.’

At least Roger managed a short bow and a smile before he walked away. He hadn’t made an enemy, then—but really, how terrible would it be to have made an enemy of someone as ultimately powerless as Roger? Benedict shook his head, repressing a sigh, before opening his hand once again and looking down at the invitation.

A small but growing part of him was sorely tempted to throw the whole thing over and go to the nearest gaming hell. He was a very distant acquaintance of everyone at this damn gathering apart from the mysterious lady he was supposed to meet—to her, he was a complete stranger. And while this particular erotic flourish would have filled him with excitement a few short months ago, now it merely filled him with boredom.

He’d come to a ball where he knew no one in order to bed a woman who was also unknown to him. How exactly was this meant to represent a well-lived life? It was the dream of every rake, something that he would be able to repeat at length in his group of scurrilous gentlemen with whom he’d been spending his days since adolescence, but how it actually felt to do it—to be the person going through with it—was a completely different matter. To feel bored, lonely and worried all at once, to be full of such wildly conflicted sentiments, was becoming more and more insufferable by the day.

But it was done, now. He’d planned it. Nothing to do but go through with it, and suffer the consequences later on.

He slipped away from the ballroom, walking cautiously along the corridor. He’d only been here once before, and he certainly hadn’t given a damn about where the library was. A brief, passing image of himself in a mirror—pale, shadows under his eyes, a general air of having lived too harshly for his age—made him turn his head away and walk faster.

Perhaps it was time to transform. He’d done it before, turning from a chubby, introverted child into a louche young man without much time and trouble taken over it. Now he could turn from an ageing, jaded rake into... well, into...

... what? There was no future there, no alternative path. With a shiver that didn't come from cold, Benedict walked on.

Five doors, six doors, a maid running through the corridor with a rag and a martyred expression that Benedict neatly sidestepped. If he recalled correctly, the library lay behind the seventh door; he stopped in front of it, steeling himself, and gently pushed the door open.

The library was a very beautiful room. More beautiful than Benedict had been expecting; he stopped on the threshold, drinking in the honeyed light that came from the candles and the painted birds that frolicked on what looked like freshly-pasted wallpaper. The library on his estate was much smaller, more neglected; if only he spent more time reading, indulging in the escapist pleasures of childhood rather than the wearisome activities that being an adult entailed.

He held his breath.

His woman, the woman he had written to, was reading a little way away. So deeply engrossed in her book that she hadn't noticed him, her chin rested heavily on one closed fist; the other hand idly stroked one corner of the book in her lap as if she were caressing something infinitely precious. She wore a heavier, more traditional gown than Benedict had been expecting, especially for an erotic encounter, but something about the heaviness of the cotton fabric embroidered with clusters of blue flowers was far more sensually thrilling than the sum of its parts.

She looked so... happy. Fascinated by what she was reading, satisfied with it in a way that made her eyes shine as she read what was written on the page. Benedict watched her for a long moment, before realising with a jolt that he had forgotten for an instant exactly why he was there.

From the look of rapt interest on the woman's face as she read, so had she. Benedict briefly considered tiptoeing away, leaving her to her book and the calm that radiated from the scene, but as he stepped backward the floorboard gave a loud creak.

The woman looked up, startled. Her eyes widened; blue eyes, commonplace in the ton, but Benedict found himself struck.

'Forgive me.' He held up his hands. He'd expected to feel like the more powerful party in this particular exchange, but he felt oddly helpless. 'I understand I'm meant to disturb you at this hour.'

'... Yes.' The woman slowly placed a book on a nearby table, rising from her chair. The tautness of her posture made Benedict think she was afraid, but the directness of her gaze said courage. 'You are.'

'Are you sure you wish for me to enter? You looked thoroughly engrossed in your reading.'

'I was.' For a moment there was an air of indecision, as if the

woman didn't quite know what to do, but then she nodded. 'But you can come in.'

It was as if he'd passed a test that he hadn't anticipated. Benedict restrained a sigh of relief as he walked over the threshold, the calm of the library covering him like a cool breeze after a hot day.

He glanced at the woman again, this time attempting to appraise her as he would when surrounded by his friends. Try as he might, it didn't work; she would be all wrong in a ballroom, all wrong with his loud, rude acquaintances laughing at her height, her plumpness, her air of slightly dreamy strength.

This was going to be interesting. His body was already telling him so, in no uncertain terms. Not at all what he expected, but... interesting.

Exciting.

'I don't know you.' The woman paused. 'I've never seen you before.'

'I think they organise it thusly.' Benedict caught a lightning-flash of confusion in the woman's eyes. 'The people who create the meetings, I mean.'

'Yes.'

'I consider it rather an interesting idea. To meet someone that one doesn't know, has never met—all for the purposes of pleasure.'

'... Yes.' A very slight blush appeared at the top of the lady's cheeks. For a woman who had agreed to this sort of meeting, she seemed charmingly unaware of the particulars. 'An—an interesting idea indeed.'

Perhaps she was frightened. That sometimes happened to women in these situations; they asked for something that they ultimately didn't know how to manage in the moment. Benedict took a step backwards. 'Of course, pleasure doesn't necessarily mean—'

'Carnal pleasure?'

'Exactly.' The way she'd said the word carnal sent a new thrill of excitement through him. 'Not at all. When one agrees to this sort of encounter, the lady is unquestionably the master of ceremonies.'

'She is? I mean—she is.' The lady nodded. 'She certainly is.'

'Which means that if you have no desire to consummate anything at this particular moment in time, we can simply have a pleasant discussion.'

'Of course.'

'And I would consider that time very well spent.' Benedict realised that he was telling the truth. It was almost a stroke of luck—he wouldn't have to play the rake here and now. Not if he didn't want to. 'I assure you.'

The woman gave a slow, shy smile. The way it transformed her

face, making previously unremarkable features turn into something entirely more than the sum of their parts, made Benedict shiver in a way that he'd never experienced before. It was as if he were an alchemist, watching base elements transform themselves into gold before his eyes.

'For example, your book.' He gently gestured to the volume she had set upon the table. 'Do you enjoy reading?'

'It's my second-favourite thing to do in all the world.'

Ah. This would become tiring if she had simply played at being shy—this felt like a way of pushing an erotic element into the conversation that wasn't entirely wanted. Not yet. 'And what is your favourite thing to do in all the world.'

The woman's smile widened. 'Writing.'

Benedict blinked. Not an erotic overture, then; this woman really was full of surprises. 'Truly?'

'Oh, yes. I love writing more than anything else in the world. I'm almost ashamed to admit it.'

'Oh, no.' Benedict took a step closer again, his feet not entirely under his control. 'One should never be ashamed of the things one loves.'

The woman looked down, the blush in her cheeks intensifying. Benedict drank her in, the way she gleamed with pride despite her shyness, and knew that he wouldn't end this encounter unless she expressly wished it so.

'And so you read in order to write.'

'Not entirely.'

'You read because you love to read.'

'Both. I love to write, I love to read, and doing one increases my love for the other.'

'Then I'm sorry to have disturbed you.'

'No. There's no need to be sorry. If... if I didn't wish to be disturbed, I wouldn't have come here.' The woman almost sounded as if she had made a discovery about herself. 'I suppose.'

'I still feel a certain lack of chivalry.'

'Feel free to throw down your cloak over any puddles you find.'

Benedict couldn't help but laugh. The woman laughed too, quietly, as if she couldn't quite believe that she'd been funny.

There had to be a way of drawing out this moment. 'Why don't you read to me?'

'Beg pardon?'

'You clearly didn't want to stop reading, and I'm not in the business of making people do things they don't want to do.' Benedict sat on the hearth-rug, sighing with pleasure as he took the weight off of his feet. This meeting was already so far away from what he'd

expected that he may as well ask for what he truly wanted, rather than what he was supposed to want. ‘And I’m sure you have a wonderful voice.’

‘You truly wish to listen to me reading to you about the South Seas?’

‘Why not? I’ve never been to the South Seas. We can imagine it together. I have only one condition.’

‘And what is that?’

‘That you come down onto the hearth rug too. Take the other corner if you want, but come down here.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I want to look at you while you read.’ Benedict shrugged. ‘You’re free to say no.’

‘I... I can come down onto the hearth rug.’

‘I’m happy you can. Thank you.’

The woman nodded in response. She rose from her chair, the light from the crackling fire in the grate making the blue flowers on her dress shine, then slowly sat down on the hearth rug. Not on the opposite corner, as Benedict was quick to note—considerably closer to him than he had been expecting.

She opened the book. The faint rustle of the pages, the flicker of the flames, gave Benedict the strange feeling of having stumbled into a place entirely outside of time.

‘Shall I begin?’

‘Please.’

‘Very well.’ The woman took a breath. When she began her voice was cautious, as if she was unused to speaking in front of other people. ‘After the perils of the storm, and the astonishing sight of fish that flew over our ship as if gifted with wings, we arrived with some trepidation at a small island...’

She had a lovely voice. Low and evocative, not the artificially high tone that so many ladies used when reading to gentlemen—and she was truly focused on the story she was reading, not looking up every few moments to see if he was looking at her. Benedict relaxed into the plush weave of the hearth rug, the fire warming his hands and face as he let himself be lost in a South Seas voyage for several long, calm minutes.

Almost lost. In truth, he was far more interested in watching the woman’s face than listening to the story, however fascinating it was. The way she was so evidently thrilled at what she was reading, so caught up in the narrator’s adventure; it was like watching someone experiencing something transcendent. Given that the ladies and gentlemen he usually kept company with made a competition out of who could look the most bored in any given situation, watching

someone get genuinely excited about something was a thrill that mingled seamlessly with the arousal already flooding his veins.

How had he never looked at her before? Because she wasn't beautiful, not really—not in the way set down by the ton. But she was attractive, deeply attractive, and Benedict inwardly cursed himself for overlooking the subtle in favour of the obvious. This woman had no doubt been at other gatherings which he had attended, perhaps sat across from him at dinners and dances, and he had managed to ignore her completely.

Not anymore. Now he could look at her with all the intensity and focus that he should have used in the past. He could let his eyes run over her eyelashes, her rounded cheeks, the plumpness of her lips as she shaped each word.

He blinked in the sudden silence. 'Why have you stopped?'

The woman paused before speaking. 'You're looking at me.'

'I never said I wouldn't. In fact, I warned you that I would.'

'I... I can feel you looking at me.' The blush in the woman's cheeks was back. 'On my skin.'

'Good. Isn't that strange—that we can tell when someone looks at us?' The hearth rug suddenly felt far too large. He leaned forward, careful not to frighten her. 'A sort of instinct.'

'I don't think I've ever felt it before.'

'Am I a terrible person to be happy that I'm the first?'

'No. I don't think you are.'

'I'm happy that for you, my look is like a touch.'

'I—I don't think it's like a touch.'

'No?'

'Well. I wouldn't know.' The woman's cheeks were bright pink now, but her voice was steady as she looked up at him. 'You haven't touched me.'

If that wasn't an invitation, he didn't know what would be. Benedict leaned closer still, briefly astonished at the excitement in him. It shone through him, every cell alive to this nameless woman in a way he hadn't felt for a long, long time.

Was it all her? Or was it that he'd given himself permission to enjoy this meeting for what it was, rather than attempt to stick to the usual order of things?

'Hmm.' He paused, lost in the way the fire sent patterns of shadow and light over the woman's skin. 'We must rectify that.'

There were so many places he wanted to touch her. That brief flash of ankle he'd seen as she'd sat on the rug, the soft, rounded curve of her waist beneath her gown. The line of her bodice, the shadow of her full breasts; yes, he could touch her there for hours. But for some reason, the place that appealed to him most was the line of flesh that

ran from beneath the woman's earlobe to where her collarbone met her neck.

There was a stray strand of hair there that had escaped its pins. Holding his breath, Benedict reached out and gently brushed the strand away.

The feeling was immediate. As if fires had been lit in his fingertips. The woman didn't flinch, but shivered; Benedict watched goosebumps ripple over her skin for a brief, intensely erotic instant.

'There.' He fought the urge to clear his throat. Quite why his voice had become so husky he couldn't say. 'How was that?'

'Different to a look.'

'Better, or worse?'

'Better.' Her smile was captivating. 'Much better.'

Just like that, Benedict knew he was going to kiss her. She was leaning forward, as was he; the firelight, the intimacy of the moment, sent a warmth through him that he could never remember feeling before. Another inch forward, then another, then another...

... the kiss was light, the gentlest brushing of lips, but astonishing all the same.

'And that?' Now he couldn't stop his voice from trembling.

'Better still.'

'Good enough to repeat?'

'Yes.' The hushed eagerness in the woman's voice sent sparks through him. 'Please.'

Another kiss. A longer one this time, deeper; not deep enough to frighten, but enough to shock Benedict to his core. The softness of the nameless woman's mouth, the quiet sigh of pleasure that came when he gently parted her lips with his tongue, had him hardening in his breeches through no fault of his own.

'And if I were to touch you in other places?' He murmured in the woman's ear, kissing her earlobe and the soft patch of skin beneath it. 'Would that be better, or worse?'

'I'm—I'm not sure.' The shiver that ran through the woman's body only made Benedict's cock harder. 'It depends.'

'Depends on what?'

'If—if I can look at you, and touch you, and make my own calculations.'

And to think he hadn't wanted to be carnal when he'd first walked into the room. What an astonishing mistake. Benedict nodded, hardly able to put just how much he wanted to touch her into words, and wrapped his arm around the soft curve of the woman's waist.

Footsteps. Loud footsteps outside the door of the library. Benedict disentangled himself, leaning so close to the fire that he half-worried that he'd singed his eyebrows, while the woman hurriedly rose from

the rug with her hand covering her mouth.

They waited for several long, tense seconds. When no-one attempted to open the door, Benedict couldn't help a burst of quiet laughter. The woman smiled, sinking back down to her original place.

'That will happen again.' She paused, her smile fading. 'The corridor outside is a well-trafficked one.'

'Then we'll go no further.' So she knew the Marton estate, then. Who was this woman? 'As much as I wish to.'

'As do I.' From her smile, the stars in her eyes, the words were no automatic piece of flattery from a woman used to this sort of arrangement. 'Truly.'

'This will come as no surprise, but I must see you again.'

'Again?' From the look of shock on the woman's face, it had come as a surprise. 'Truly?'

'Of course. Do you think I kiss women on hearth rugs as part of the normal course of my day?'

'You did it very well. Perhaps you do.'

'Well, I don't.' He'd done much worse up until yesterday, but that was yesterday and this was now. He'd take more chaste kisses on a hearth rug with this woman over far more depraved activities than anyone else. 'So in order to do more of it, I'll need to see you again.'

'Where would you like to see me again?'

Anywhere. Anywhere I can look at you, listen to you. A whole world of possibilities rose in Benedict's mind, any number of private and pleasure-focused places in the city, but he pushed them away with difficulty.

'If I may make a suggestion?'

'Please do.'

'The Kenwick pleasure gardens open next week. Perhaps we could visit them.'

Alone and unchaperoned? What sort of parents allowed a young woman to visit pleasure gardens alone? Benedict frowned instinctively, but hurriedly corrected his expression when the woman's face fell.

'Don't worry.' She folded her arms, almost hugging herself. 'It was a foolish idea.'

'No. No, it wasn't.' He would have to keep her away from crowds—above all away from his acquaintances—but the idea of walking outdoors with her stirred his blood. Perhaps she would have a chaperone, but she would lose her. 'It's a wonderful idea.'

'You don't seem entirely convinced.'

'I am.' He reached for her hand. A thrill ran through each finger as he took her hand in his, gently pressing his lips to her soft skin. 'Believe me. And—'

‘And what?’

‘And I must know your name.’

This time it was the woman’s turn to frown. It had been an impetuous question, borne of the sudden and overpowering need to know as much as possible about her; Benedict stumbled over his words, struggling to correct himself. ‘Or—or not. Forgive me.’

‘There’s nothing to forgive.’

‘If you wish for this to remain nameless—’

‘Names mean families, and society, and—and the removal of all enchantment, I think, in the end.’

‘Then we shall remain nameless.’ He’d ask the pleasure-club who he’d been matched with. He’d bribe anyone he had to. ‘For now.’

‘Thank you.’ The woman rose again from the hearth-rug, this time more slowly. ‘And now I should take my leave.’

‘Can’t you stay a little longer?’

‘Not if I don’t wish to risk my reputation.’

‘And how am I supposed to survive until next week? Come to that, how are we supposed to make more exact arrangements for Kenwick?’

‘Do you know the bookseller on Hennerton Street?’

An abrupt change of subject. ‘Yes.’

‘Any letters addressed to that bookseller for Jane Smith will find their way to me.’

‘Does that mean your name is—’

‘No. Of course not.’ The woman’s laughter was warm and soft, like a summer breeze. ‘Goodbye.’

Goodbye felt far too final. But as Benedict struggled to come up with an elegant parting line, the woman turned on her heel and left.

As the library door softly clicked closed, Benedict sprawled out on the hearth rug with a slow, dizzying sigh.

‘Bloody hell.’ He spoke to the frescoes on the ceiling, deeply aware of how aroused he still was. ‘What on earth just happened?’

Outside in the corridor, Bertha struggled to breathe. Eventually, with a great effort of will, she managed to make her head stop spinning and take a few steps in the direction of the ballroom.

It was as if her whole body had caught alight. Sweet, pleasurable flames licked at every part of her, urging her to go back into the library and sit down on the hearth rug again. Spend more time kissing that handsome, bright-eyed rake who, through some minor miracle, had no idea who she was.

He didn’t know he was meant to ignore her at best, despise her at worse. He had no idea she was an Unmarriageable. Possibilities filled her mind, as quick and electric as summer lightning.

She had a chance to live as if she were in a book. To indulge in a

fantasy that she had never dared to imagined for herself. All she had to do was try and keep her head—a difficult task—enough to not reveal to the gentleman who she was.

That wouldn't be difficult. No-one knew or cared who she was anyway. The faintest hint of regret tinged Bertha's happy thoughts before she shook them away.

One had to be happy with what came into one's life. It was the only way to live in peace. And now that she had such a marvellous opportunity to live as someone better for a little while, she would live her new life to the full.

The ball ended in the wee small hours. Then a fleet of carriages made their way to the seamier haunts of London's most infamous streets, where the sounds of wild carousing could be heard until the considerably larger hours of the morning. In the uppermost bedroom of one particularly scandalous pleasure house, Benedict tossed and turned until a harsh tone cut through his dreams.

'Mr. Harrow.' The courtesan's voice had Benedict struggling into uneasy wakefulness. 'Mr. Harrow?'

'Y-yes?'

'It's eight in the morning.' The woman's face swam into clarity as Benedict opened his eyes. Professionally painted from eyebrows to neck, she still managed to look both tired and deeply annoyed with him. 'We're closing.'

'But—'

'You arrived here, gave your name, and spent about an hour irritating the girls before passing out on a chaise longue. I moved you here when you gave no signs of waking.'

'Irritating them? That doesn't sound like me.'

'It wasn't like you. At all. I don't know what gentleman comes into my establishment and starts asking my ladies about a girl who likes reading, rather than taking advantage of the pleasures on offer.' The courtesan shook her head, a weary sigh escaping her. 'None of them could persuade you to even take off your trousers.'

'I'll pay for the wasted time.'

'I know you will. Or you'd have been thrown in the Thames rather than put in this nice little bed.' The woman patted the covers, her tired eyes still projecting a world of steel if Benedict threatened to argue. 'Now you can spend another fifteen minutes here, but then I have to—'

'Don't worry. I'll go.' At least he'd had the sense to come to a pleasure house, rather than somewhere completely unexpected. At least his braying group of gaming hell friends wouldn't think he'd been possessed by a demon. 'I'll go now.'

A brief splash of horribly cold water from the basin, a deeply uncomfortable moment of counting out notes under the courtesan's frosty gaze, and then he was back on the streets. Benedict breathed in the smoky morning air, coughing as the acrid smell of horse manure and pleasure-house perfume hit the back of his throat, trying to piece together just why he'd done what he'd done the previous night.

He sighed with relief as he remembered. Despite being befuddled in the extreme by the attraction he'd felt for the mysterious woman in the library, he'd been intelligent enough to realise—at least, realise some hours after their encounter—that she couldn't possibly have been the woman he'd arranged to meet in the first place. The lady he'd met had been innocent, excited in a way that no jaded woman used to carnal affairs could ever be.

So who was she? Who was the lady with the book, who had coaxed him into both a conversation and a kiss that had by now burned itself into his memory? Quite why he'd chosen to ask a group of courtesans Benedict couldn't tell, but brandy seemed to have been the deciding factor. That, and the fact that he couldn't even hint at a genuine attraction to a normal woman among his gaming hell friends.

They'd eat him alive. Benedict shuddered, wiping a sudden sheen of sweat from his brow, knowing that he'd need to meet them this morning anyway. If he was meeting his mysterious lady at the pleasure gardens next week—and he was, unless he'd somehow managed to sleep through an untold number of days at the pleasure house—he didn't intend to go there without knowing exactly who she was.

He'd have to ask his friends. Not ask them openly, of course—Christ, the thought of it—but they'd be as good a source as any when it came to a woman's name. As soon as he'd had about a pint of very hot coffee, he'd feel capable of getting some useful information out of them with a bare minimum of cunning.

Three very large cups of coffee later, the warmth of the coffee house still clinging to his bones as he walked through a tangle of streets, he walked up to the crooked sign that read *Cheeseman's Fish Shoppe*. Mr. Cheeseman didn't own it anymore, and the place hadn't been a fish shop in years, but the sign still hung. Now it was exactly the sort of dirty, disreputable coffee house that he'd been perfectly comfortable visiting up until about a week ago. A place where, to his deep discomfort, the friends he'd made still found themselves completely at home.

There they were, huddled around a table: Roger, Bothwell and Simms. Benedict steeled himself as he walked towards them; Roger looked up, his eyes brightening.

'Ah, here's our old reprobate!' He slapped his back with what

Benedict felt was an excess of heartiness; he tried not to wince. 'Just come back from your favourite ladies, eh?'

'Of course. I can't disappoint them.' How had he lived through so many conversations of this nature without feeling constantly grimy, as if talking to the men around him left him in need of a bath? 'They send their regards.'

'From their beds, I imagine. I left them incapable of walking.'

'I'm sure you did.' From what he'd glimpsed of Roger's anatomy while changing after fencing, Benedict doubt he'd leave the ladies incapable of anything. If anything, he'd leave them more than capable of laughter. 'Bothwell, Simms, good morning.'

'A good morning to you too.' Bothwell was even older than he, which made Roger's jokes about Benedict's advanced age even more difficult to stomach, but the man still appeared to spend every hour of the day and night doing disreputable things. Quite when he managed to sleep, Benedict didn't know. 'You look different.'

'Different?'

'Yes.' Simms frowned. A man with an unfortunate face, rat-like from certain angles, his suspicious gaze was uniquely unpleasant. 'As if you've rested.'

'I can assure you that I've done no such thing.'

'And I'm sure the ladies you've spent the night carousing with haven't done any such thing either.' Roger slapped him on the back. 'A cup of coffee?'

'Oh, no thank you. I've already taken my coffee.' Benedict paused, trying to think of the least suspicious way to begin the conversation he needed to have. 'But I'm happy to converse.'

'Ah, yes? And what about?'

'What else?' Benedict shrugged. 'Women.'

Bothwell and Simms laughed along with Roger. Benedict waited, aware that he would need even more patience than he'd predicted, until Bothwell finally spoke again. 'Your mind is insatiable, Harrow. Along with the rest of you. Any woman in particular you want to speak about?'

'Just one? Of course not.'

'Then I've got the most hair-raising story you can imagine about the Countess of Inniston—the things she makes her footmen do.' Simms beckoned them closer, but didn't really bother to lower his voice. 'She has a special chair in the morning room with a—'

'Come now. The Countess of Inniston is always doing something improper—I know all about her.' Benedict tried to keep his voice light, but it was difficult. 'Let's not waste a morning discussing her.'

He had to think harder about why the woman on the hearth rug had been so shy. So determined to conceal who she was. Why would a

woman choose to be mysterious if she enjoyed a good reputation in the ton? Any of the more scandalous ladies, the ones gleeful about their former and current carnal activities, were already known to him; he'd spent months bed-hopping until it had all grown stale.

Perhaps his mysterious reader didn't have a good reputation at all. Perhaps she was one of those struggling, anonymous young woman sat at the side of the room while others were dancing—the ones he had never looked twice at. Benedict blinked, fighting an unexpected wave of shame, before continuing the conversation with renewed vigour.

'I must confess, gentlemen—I'm out of the circle when it comes to your average lady. I've been limiting my activities to the professionals, and those enterprising women who form a part of the pleasure club.' He paused for the filthy laughter, which came as predictably as a clock's chime, and carried on. 'It would be easier for you to tell me who to avoid rather than who to pursue.'

'Oh, Harrow. When it comes to women to avoid, there are always a dozen in every direction.' Bothwell sighed, shaking his head. 'The Larchwood Sisters, for one thing. Both of them equally ugly. It's as if nature wanted to play a joke on every gentleman with eyes.'

'And Lavinia Wall. She's so thin you can practically see through her.'

'And Henrietta Richmond.' Roger slapped his thigh, laughing heartily at nothing. 'What a horse.'

For the first time in Benedict's life, he objectively considered the looks of the men around him as they casually passed judgement on the ladies of the ton. Bothwell was getting old, too old to indulge in this sort of talk without inviting unfair comparisons, and Simms looked like a cut-purse even to his friends. To women, they both had to look horrifying. If he cast the same dispassionate eye on his own looks, even if he was far away from any mirrors, he had to admit that the image wouldn't be wildly pleasing to every lady who cared to look at him.

But the woman on the hearth rug had liked him. Astonishingly, that felt like more than enough. It felt like everything.

'Apart from those particularly ugly specimens, there's really no-one of note.' Bothwell put his hand on his chin as he mused. 'No-one else is worthy of gossip.'

'All the gossip's old gossip.' Simms snickered to himself. 'Even those Unmarriageables.'

Unmarriageables. A distant bell rang somewhere in Benedict's brain. 'Lord, I should read more gossip rags. I can't remember what that refers to.'

'Don't you remember? That troupe of utterly forgettable women who decided to inform the world that they would accept no proposals

of marriage. As if they had a choice in the matter, and weren't so parched from lack of suitors that they were in danger of drying out completely.' Simm's coarse laugh was particularly unpleasant. 'And then one of them married the Duke of Marton. Arabella.'

'She was an Unmarriageable?'

'I know. Can you believe it?'

'Oh, Lord.' Benedict silently gave all due respect to the Duchess of Marton, but he didn't care about her in the slightest. 'Who were the rest of them? There were five, weren't there?'

'I think so. There are a lot more than five women in the ton who are going to finish as spinsters, but these five decided to make everyone's job easier.' Bothwell closed his eyes, his chin still on his hand. 'There was Arabella, the duchess—'

'Do you think she organised it all to that end, the cunning minx?'

'Very probably, you can never trust a woman in the same way you can trust a man—'

'And the others?' Benedict hadn't meant to interrupt, but the conversation was fast becoming interminable. He knew he'd forget the names of everyone else—all that mattered was the woman with the book. The letter to the papers would be pinned to the wall of the club, along with all the other spicy correspondence that made its way to the gossip rags—he would find it today, put it in his waistcoat. 'They can't all be duchesses. There aren't enough dukes willing to throw themselves into the matrimonial fray.'

'You're right there.' Bothwell's eyes were still closed. 'There's the duchess, then a skinny one who wouldn't say boo to a goose—what was her name? Rose, I think. Something flowery. Then that awful tall one who seems far too at home everywhere, thinks she's as funny as a man, talks about painting all the time—'

'With the Christian name of Grace.' Simms snorted with laughter. 'I can't think of anything less appropriate for that one.'

'Then the one whose father is a little too over-enthusiastic with his punishments—'

'What?' The idea of the woman on the hearth rug undergoing such treatment made his stomach turn. 'Who?'

'Lord, I can't remember her first name. She's a quiet thing. As she should be, after such rigorous correction. I imagine that letter would have got her a black eye.'

'That's... that's terrible.'

'What?' Bothwell opened his eyes, frowning. 'Why do you care if some flibbertigibbet from the ton got justly punished for her sins?'

Simms and Roger were frowning at him too. Benedict cleared his throat, unable to summon up a defence of himself that wouldn't make him feel like the worst person in the world.

He'd been drunk when he'd made friends with these people. Drunk as he'd maintained the friendships, and pleasure-hungry, and—and lost. Now that he'd found himself in the most unexpected way, found something that he wanted, it was as if he were looking at Bothwell, Simms and Roger across a gulf that could never be closed.

'I'm feeling queasy. Lack of sleep, too much coffee.' It was true. He didn't have to add that their conversation was making him nauseous. 'And the other one? The fifth.'

'Christ, the fifth. You're making me work far too hard of a morning.' Bothwell frowned more deeply as he closed his eyes again. The worst of the lot... that's it!

'Well?'

'The fat one. The one who wears last Season's fashions.' Bothwell slapped the table triumphantly. 'Always with a bloody book in her hand.'

'Oh, her.' Simms shook his head, tutting. 'Ugly name, too. A Miss Bertha Napp.'

Bertha. She was the woman on the hearth rug, the woman reading about the South Seas with secret, intense pleasure. She was the woman who had kissed him.

Bertha Napp. He'd never heard a more beautiful name.

'All of them are offensive to the eye, in truth, but Miss Napp is particularly ungainly. Always squirrelling herself away in a corner and reading, rather than attempting to make herself presentable.'

'And a scribbler, too. She's always got a pencil in her hand.'

'What on earth could she be writing? It isn't as if she's got any sort of life to write about.'

'Forgive me, gentlemen.' If he had to listen to much more of this he'd have to start punching people, and he didn't wish to make the other customers in the coffee house feel uncomfortable. Still, his fingers were itching for it; he clenched his hands into fists as he rose from his stool and gave a short bow. 'The queasiness is becoming urgent.'

'Too much talk of Miss Napp.' Roger laughed. 'It can make any man queasy.'

Perhaps just one punch. One powerful enough to break the little bastard's nose. Benedict restrained himself with a great effort of will. 'I need my bed and a basin. For a day, at least—maybe two.'

'Of course, Harrow.' Bothwell gave a lordly nod, as if he was the one with the power to decide who went home and for what. 'Come back to us when you've recovered.'

'You can count on it.' The lie slipped easily off of his tongue. He intended to avoid these three degenerates for as long as humanly possible. 'Good day to you all.'

As he exited the coffee house, he made sure to step heavily on Roger's toes. He didn't turn back when the man yelped, walking out into the cool morning air with a deep, steadying breath.

Strange, how life changed. Benedict was more than aware of his many flaws, but there was one shining advantage to his personality that he never shrank from using. When things changed—when life threw one in a completely unexpected direction and left one without the tools to manage it—he was one of the best people he knew for committing without complaint to what came next.

Simply put, he threw himself into whatever life threw at him. And now that Bertha Napp had been presented to him, no matter how it had happened or what it meant, he would pursue her with as much ardency and pleasure as he had pursued his former rakehood.

Bertha Napp. She was, in some fundamental way, related to the rest of his life. Now all he had to do, with every ounce of his native skill and talent, was try and persuade her that he had a place in her life as well.

A letter. The bookseller's address was at the forefront of his mind. *I'll start with a very long letter.*

Six days later, the Napp townhouse was quiet. The building rarely lifted out of a funereal silence, given a lack of visitors and Mr. Napp's general dislike of gatherings due to the expense and noise that they produced, but this particular evening's quiet was very quiet indeed.

All that could be heard, apart from Mrs. Napp's snoring, was the gentle scratching of pen on paper. Bertha had thrown all of her bedsheets over her head as she sat at her desk in a vain attempt to muffle the sound; her single, much prized candle on the windowsill, lit with the flint and tinderbox she kept hidden under a loose floorboard, gave the letter under her hands a slightly dizzy glow.

She had tried to wait until morning, but she couldn't. Two more letters from him had arrived at the bookseller that day, the name *Jane Smith* written in a by now familiar hand. Two letters a day, sometimes three, for the entire week—and such long letters, with so many fascinating details of his life, that Bertha needed the entire night to compose replies worthy of him.

Benedict. She had learned his name the day after the ball. She had gone to the bookseller with some other matter, half-expecting there to be no letter—but there had been, and it had been long, and... and...

Benedict. She wrote it carefully, waiting what felt like an atrocious length of time for the ink to dry, then carefully pressed her finger to the name. A faint shadow of it came away on her fingertip; it was as if he had marked her.

Benedict,

Thank you for continuing to keep your surname hidden. I know this insistence on mystery irritates you, but trust that it is necessary...

Necessary for him. A gentleman as clearly handsome and well-connected as he was would be socially ruined by contact with her—and she would be harshly pulled into the limelight and accused of all sorts of terrible things. Probably.

... as always, I can only tell you that there is no legal, matrimonial reason why I wish to remain anonymous. Trust that, and me, as I trust you.

Your descriptions of your childhood make me smile every time I read them. To think of your grandfather caught in the apple tree, and your mother with all those cakes! You can feel the joy through the paper. You are so generous with your life, and all those who inhabit it—I feel as if I have been given a place among them, as far away from them as I am.

Was that too much? Oh, it didn't matter. At heart this was all a fantasy; she would never be forced to confront these words in a real world, a real future. And she did feel as if she had been granted a place among Benedict's relatives, his childhood friends—even if he was far more reticent about his present circumstances, his current life.

It was probably to maintain secrecy. Not because he was ashamed of her, of this. Before Bertha could probe that painful thought too closely, she put her letter to Benedict aside and drew another sheet of paper towards her.

Arabella,

I know my correspondence has been dreadfully patchy this week, but do not despair. I am perfectly well and very happy. As soon as I have a spare moment, I will write you a very long letter with all of my news—prepare yourself, because my life has become far more interesting of late.

There was really no need to write any more than that. Her parents had never shown any inclination to read her letters, but still—it felt strange to write down even the briefest, safest account of her adventures on paper. If she did that, it would somehow be real. Though knowing Arabella—how strange to think of her as a duchess

now, and so happy!—she would be able to glean something from this letter than Bertha hadn't even written down.

Happiness left its mark on the page, just as it did on the person. Even though this week had been largely sleepless, even though she had lived on coffee and the occasional stale roll as she feverishly wrote pages in her manuscript in-between replying to letters, even if she had walked miles to the bookseller and back... oh, whenever she looked in the mirror at herself, she looked *happy*.

And tomorrow, if she were unlucky, it could all end. She drew Benedict's letter towards her again, writing before she could think better of it.

Is it a cowardly thing to say I am frightened of meeting you at Kenwick tomorrow? Not because I think it will be unpleasant, but because I know it will be wonderful. I am frightened of wonder, I think, preferring it to be safely confined to a page rather than wild and in the world. But you bring wonder with you, it hangs on your coat-tails, and...

... and all she wanted to do was feel it again. Feel his lips on hers, hear his words in her ear. Meet the man who had written her so many beautiful letters—who had done so many beautiful things, even in the brief time that they had known one another.

It was wrong to feel so much so soon. Unwise. But she'd spent her whole life trying to be wise, trying to be safe.

How glorious it felt to be dangerous.

... and to think of sharing it with you, if only for an afternoon, gives me great joy.

She signed her letter, waiting for it to dry, then gently folded it. She would seal it tomorrow at first light, then give it to the messenger boy that made his rounds early—that way it would reach Benedict at the address he had given her, a London townhouse that she thankfully didn't know.

She could have asked Arabella about it. Arabella would surely know. But ignorance had to be maintained in order for joy to flourish.

She yawned. Now was the time to snatch a few hours of sleep at least, or she would look ragged at Kenwick. She carefully tiptoed to her bed, carrying her sheets with her, and lay against her pillows without so much as a single creak from the mattress.

Benedict's bundle of letters was still in her hand. Bertha brought them to her chest, stroking the ribbon as she closed her eyes.

Benedict. Let her feel this contentment for as long as she could. Before it was all taken away from her. *Benedict, Benedict, Benedict.*

Kenwick pleasure gardens didn't have the size and splendour of Vauxhall's offering, but it was beautiful in its own way. A large hedge-walk, explored by genteel dowagers during the day and rakes with their paramours at night, along with a tea house that prided itself on the quality of its tea and a nearby pie shop that cared less about quality but was astonishingly cheap; these things ensured a steady stream of ladies, gentlemen and families determined to escape the drudgery of the working day.

The day was unseasonably warm, but the dark grey sky promised difficult weather later on. Bertha, sweating in her best day-gown and itching beneath her gloves, couldn't help but stare up at the brutal clouds and worry.

In truth, she was worried about everything. Worried about the complete indifference her parents had shown to the fact that she was leaving the house alone; in the past they had at least begrudgingly sent a maid with her, but now, nothing. Her father would probably have some answer prepared about the cost of sending a maid out as opposed to keeping her at home being useful—as if protecting their eldest daughter was a useless activity, now that she had declared her intention not to marry.

But that, at its heart, was an auxiliary worry. All of her true worries—all of the panic that clawed at her beneath the stifling restrictions of her gown—lay with Benedict. More specifically whether Benedict would actually come and meet her here, actually walk and talk with her in reality again, or if he would simply vanish into the ether like a dream.

They had revealed so much in their letters to one another. Or rather, Benedict had revealed so much: his childhood, his wayward adolescence, his current life. He had filled each densely-written page with so many details, so many things that could easily be used to identify him, that it would be the work of a moment to find out exactly who he was.

But she didn't want to. He would remain simply Benedict, and she would remain nameless. At most, Jane Smith. It was the only way to preserve this delicious, giddy feeling of happiness in her heart...

... if he arrived, that is. It was the exact hour that they had agreed to meet, and she could see no sign of him on the horizon.

She narrowed her eyes. On the very edge of her vision, walking a little way away from the crowds of smiling ladies and gentlemen, was a figure that already felt incredibly familiar.

He had come. Come to her. For a moment she was paralysed with terror: not of Benedict, smiling in a dark blue coat of an astonishingly elegant cut, but that she somehow wouldn't measure up to what had

happened on the hearth rug a week before. Then she'd been in the firelight, in an evening gown that was at least vaguely becoming despite being old—now, in daylight, she would inevitably be a disappointment.

But Benedict didn't look disappointed as he approached. There was a strong, bright smile on his face that made everything else fade into the background. Bertha, even in the midst of intense anxiety, felt a rebellious spark of hope.

'Good morning to you.' She curtsied, trying to keep a foolish smile from appearing on her face. 'How nice to see you here.'

'Likewise.' Benedict looked so thoroughly dashing that Bertha couldn't quite believe he was here to see her. From the tips of his boots to the rim of his hat, he looked like something out of a fashion plate. Suddenly her gown felt even more constricting, even less fashionable; she awkwardly brushed down her skirts, removing imaginary specks of dust. 'How lovely to see you in daylight.'

'Oh, now. Firelight is far more forgiving.'

'No part of you needs forgiving.' Benedict bowed again, more slowly this time. 'Trust me.'

To be spoken to in public with such clear favour... oh, she had no idea how to respond. Bertha decided to curtsy again, not quite sure that she was getting it right, but Benedict seemed satisfied all the same.

'So.' Benedict paused. 'Are we to walk through the gardens at a respectable distance from one another, surreptitiously trading comments with one another about fellow explorers? Unless you've left your maid had a nearby tea house and fear catching her eye.'

He assumed she would have a chaperone. Shame mingled with tenderness in Bertha's breast. 'I doubt we'll see her. I lost her very thoroughly.'

'Then perhaps we could walk a little closer together? The hedge-walk looks to be quite crowded, but if we—'

'We should avoid other ladies and gentlemen of our set, I think.' The idea of being recognised with Benedict in public was too astonishing to consider fully. To avoid the slight flash of disappointment in Benedict's eyes, not to mention her own desire to grasp his hand in hers and explore the gardens as if the banns had already been read, she walked with a determined step down the path that led to Kenwick Pavilion.

Benedict followed her immediately. Even at six very respectable feet apart, following the weedy gravel path that led away from brighter pleasures and towards the shaded pavilion, Bertha was aware of his face and form in a way that she had never experienced with any other living soul. She glanced at him with increasing frequency as the

minutes passed, too frightened to speak first again, but drinking in his presence like a thirsty traveller at an oasis.

‘Well. We have decided to walk like this, and talk like this.’ Benedict’s tone was easy, but the words flickered in the air like lightning. ‘But there must be other things we can do.’

‘Absolutely. I assumed that you would already know these gardens intimately.’

‘I rarely spend my time in beautiful places with interesting people. In truth, there’s an embarrassment of riches here that I don’t know how to partake in.’

‘Are you sure you don’t wish to climb apple trees as your grandfather did?’

Benedict laughed. The happiness in his face made Bertha catch her breath. ‘You read with close attention.’

‘There’s no other way to read.’

‘I—I had half-feared to have written too much.’ Benedict glanced quickly at her, a flash of vulnerability in his eyes before he looked away. ‘I have drowned you in words this week.’

‘When it comes to words, I am an adept swimmer. I don’t drown very easily at all.’

Conversations weren’t meant to be like this. They were meant to skim the surface of life, never touching on anything all that important. They weren’t meant to dive into the very heart of one at a moment’s notice, bringing forth sentiments that ripped the breath from one’s lungs. In the silence that followed her words, Bertha tried to keep control of herself.

Benedict couldn’t be as affected as she was. It would be impossible. But—but he was walking closer to her now, even though they weren’t meant to. If she reached out, she would be able to touch him.

‘So.’ Her voice shook. ‘Perhaps climbing apple trees, perhaps visiting the pavilion. There’s a stone temple a little way away—built recently, of course, but made to look ancient. Then there’s the river, although it probably won’t be at its best in the current weather, and —’

‘I think we should do everything that the pleasure gardens allow us to do.’

‘Oh. You do?’ A wave of disappointment flooded her. There would be little time for true conversation if he insisted on partaking in each and every pleasure that Kenwick had to offer. ‘Everything?’

‘Oh, yes. I think we should walk through the hedge-walks, commenting on the planting and the other ladies and gentlemen we see in the hedge-walk. I think we should walk around the lake as well, even if it rains, trying to count the ducks and seeing if they’ve built

nests in the marshier areas. I think we should buy a rather sour-tasting meat pie from one of the sellers at the entrance, then make awkward conversation about the weather for a little while, then possibly have a small accident on a muddy path and spend the rest of the day limping—’

‘You’re a connoisseur of terrible excursions.’ Bertha held a hand to her mouth, grateful for her laughter. ‘How many have you suffered through in other pleasure gardens?’

‘At least four. I’ve never been to any nice ones, remember—only sad, sordid outdoor spaces. Soldiers returning from the wars should pity me.’

‘I’m sure they’ve started a charitable collection for you.’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised.’

‘But truly, how do you wish to spend this—’

‘Look.’ Benedict’s arm was suddenly around her waist, his face much closer to hers. ‘How do you think I wish to spend today?’

His touch was so immediate, so overwhelming, that Bertha had to stop her knees from buckling. How was it possible that even the lightest touch had this effect? But a part of her had been dreaming of this ever since the hearth-rug, had been imagining his touch as she’d read his letters again and again, clutching them to her chest as she lay in bed.

They were far away from any crowds. No-one could see them. A part of her was shocked that she was glad of that, pleased that no-one else could see them, but too much of her was overwhelmed by Benedict’s hands to do anything but surrender to the feeling.

‘It doesn’t have to be the whole day. Not if you don’t wish it. It can be an hour, a minute, a moment. But for that stretch of time, I wish to spend it touching you. As scandalous as that may seem.’ His finger stroked the curve of her waist. ‘Is that too scandalous for you to contemplate?’

‘No.’ If he kept touching her, everything would somehow be all right. ‘Not at all.’

‘Good.’ Benedict’s smile faded, replaced with something more meaningful. ‘Because—because I have thought of you without ceasing. Do you know that?’

Maintaining even a hint of indifference was impossible. Before she could stop herself, think better of it, Bertha closed her eyes and pressed her lips to his.

Kissing a gentleman in public would mean the worst sort of social death if discovered. Her parents would undoubtedly disown her, but—but oh, the heat of his lips was so delicious, the shiver that ran through him at her touch. Benedict cupped her face in his hands, stroking her cheeks; Bertha couldn’t resist sighing at the pleasure of

his touch, kissing him with even more fervency in the middle of the path.

‘I have thought of you without ceasing too.’ She pulled away, breathless, gripping his coat with both hands. ‘And I’m sorry for saying it, for thinking it—’

‘Don’t be sorry.’ Benedict’s mouth covered hers again, the kiss brief but potent enough to weaken her knees once again. ‘I wasn’t ashamed to say it, or to think it.’

‘I don’t want to eat meat pies or visit anything, or—’

‘Neither do I. Just this, just you. Just more.’

More. That was what she wanted too: more, more, more. More kisses, more touches, more of the things that she’d only imagined and never been able to experience. The desire had come with the force of an avalanche, sudden and devastating, sweeping up every finer feeling in its path.

Now she didn’t have to be a writer, idly choosing possible fates for her characters. Neither was she a reader, passively observing great events through words on a page. She was real, alive, caught up in dreams and desires beyond her control, and she was damned if she was going to let even a second of it slip through her fingers.

‘I want more.’ Each kiss only made her want more kisses. ‘Please.’

‘Then we’ll go somewhere where I can give you more.’

‘The temple.’ People would be at the pavilion, but the temple was a near-forgotten part of the Kenwick route. Set deep in the trees, it had a door that could be wedged shut; she’d written there without interruption for hours. ‘We’ll go to the temple.’

‘Then take me there. But I warn you.’ Benedict’s voice in her ear set a fire racing though her. ‘I’m not feeling holy in the slightest.’

The stone temple was damp, with trails of ivy peeking in through cracks in the ceiling, but Bertha didn’t care. It could have been a half-ruined hut, a patch of grass beneath the shade of a tree. All that mattered was Benedict: Benedict throwing his thick coat on the ground, gently laying her atop it. The look on his face as he came to her, covering her with his body as his mouth met hers.

These were kisses that she’d never imagined experiencing before. Deep, potent kisses that fed a hunger in her, a need for things that she couldn’t name and didn’t know how to ask for. All she could do was match every kiss Benedict gave her, shivering with pleasure whenever his tongue brushed against hers, pressing her body against his in a way that would have made her burn with shame mere weeks ago.

She bit back a moan as Benedict kissed his way along the line of her neck, his teeth grazing her collarbone. A few hasty movements to remove her shawl, and there he was; he kissed along the line of her

bodice, every brush of his lips sending sweet, wicked sparks through her skin.

‘May I?’ His fingers were at her bodice. Bertha sighed at the sensation as he cupped her breasts, his thumbs moving to her nipples with a swift, expert stroke of her flesh. To have someone hold such an intimate part of her—it was like coming alive. ‘I want to see you.’

‘Please.’ The thought of his eyes on her too only heightened the hot, hasty feeling between her legs. ‘Please do.’ Another kiss, this time at the line where her breasts met, sent a tremble through her that made her cry out. ‘Quickly.’

Benedict’s smile lessened her embarrassment at wanting it so much. He undid the ribbon at the top of her bodice, his eyes dark with desire as he slowly pulled down the fabric of both her gown and shift.

‘Christ.’ His voice was reverent as he brought his hands back to her bared breasts. Bertha couldn’t breathe; the feel of skin on skin was so different from his hands against her gown. ‘You’re beautiful.’

In that moment, she felt beautiful. Beautiful in a free, salacious way that she had never envisioned. All she could do was nod, clutching his coat in her hands beneath her as Benedict moved his thumbs back to her nipples, closing her eyes in swift, surprising ecstasy as he made slow circles around each swollen, reddened nub.

‘Oh!’ Her eyes flew open, startled as a thrilling jolt of pleasure shot through her. Benedict’s head was bent to her breasts, his lips closed over her nipple as he sucked. The sight of it, the utterly scandalous nature of it, only made the sensation all the more delicious. ‘I—’

‘Forgive me.’ Benedict withdrew. ‘Should I stop?’

‘No. Please don’t. I—I simply didn’t know that one could do... well. That.’

‘You’re not as eloquent as you usually are.’ Benedict kissed the tip of her nose, that devilish smile on his face. ‘Has something happened to make you less articulate?’

‘Oh, you’re—you’re *horrible*.’

‘Let me carry on, and we’ll see how horrible I am. And we’ll see how many words you can remember.’

She could barely remember what her name was. Lord knows how dim she’d be after a few more minutes of this. Bertha arched her back, a cry on her lips that she shouldn’t contain, as Benedict drew a nipple into his mouth again.

Time ceased to exist. The outside world ceased to exist. The entire world was this stone temple; the sounds of the pleasure gardens grew more distant by the moment. Benedict’s mouth on her nipple grew more powerful, more assertive; he coaxed more and more sensation from her with deep, shivering tugs, his tongue lavishing attention on

every inch of her stiff peaks, moving from one to the other as Bertha tried desperately to keep herself anchored to the world.

She was so wet between her legs. Wet, slick, ready for something that she couldn't conceive of. She needed to be touched there, as forbidden as that was; she took hold of Benedict's hand in a sudden, tight grip, pressing it to her skirts.

'Please.' She couldn't articulate it any further; she looked at him, hoping he would understand. 'Please—I—'

'Like this?' Benedict's hand was suddenly sliding beneath her skirts, resting at her inner thigh, moving higher; his fingers brushed the curls of her mound. Bertha nodded vigorously; this, she needed this. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. You said more—I want more.'

'Tell me when to stop.' His fingers crept higher, parting her lips. As he stroked over her slick, wet flesh, brushing against her bud, Bertha held her breath in a vain attempt not to moan. 'More?'

'More.' A wild burst of inspiration came to her. 'And—and let me touch you too.'

Benedict looked at her, his eyes briefly fraught with indecision. Then, with a nod, he began to fumble with his breeches with one hand while he stroked her. Just as Bertha caught a glimpse of his cock, her heart caught in her throat, his fingers slid inside her with a slow, wicked gentleness that sent a deep thrill of pleasure down her spine.

'Deeper?'

'Yes.' She didn't know if it was possible, but she wanted him to try. It was as if he had pinned her to one place, one moment, with little more than a simple gesture; her core shivered as she welcomed him, drawing him deeper with a shift of her hips. How had she never known how much she could *feel*? 'Please.'

'Tell me if it hurts.'

'It doesn't.' She felt tight, filled, but satisfied in a giddy, bone-deep way that was entirely new. No shock came from what he'd done apart from the physical surprise of the sensation; there was no shame to it, no scandal, which was almost more shocking than the feeling itself. He was inside her, and it was right—his words were in her heart after all, his face so close to hers. It was right that they should be as entwined as possible. 'Now let me touch you too.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.' She bit her lip, sighing with pleasure as Benedict curled his fingers. 'Oh, but if you do that I'll—'

'Then touch me.' His palm was warm as he gently drew her hand to his stiff cock. Bertha stroked her fingertips along the rigid shaft, astonished at the feel of him; so potent, so strangely primal. 'Oh, Christ—like that.'

‘Like this?’

‘Yes. Just like that. I’ll keep time with you.’ He curled his fingers in her again with a wicked smile; Bertha laughed breathlessly as she stroked along his shaft in return. Once, twice, again; the pleasure wrapped around her like spun gold, her heart beating rapidly in her throat. ‘See?’

‘I see.’

‘Again?’

‘Yes. Please.’

‘Like that. Keep going.’ He kissed her forehead, his lips pressed to her skin as he murmured to her. ‘This is better than a visit to the pavilion.’

‘And—and sour meat pies.’

‘And a rainy river. Bloody hell, you feel good.’

‘Likewise.’ What had it been—three strokes, a dozen, a hundred? It didn’t matter any more; time was irrelevant here. In Benedict’s arms, his fingers deep in her most intimate place, it was as if they’d retreated into the safe, beautiful world of their letters where past and present intermingled, the future non-existent. ‘Likewise.’

The rhythm was instinctive, older than anything else she knew: inherent in her bones, somehow. His fingers deep inside her, her fingers on his shaft; they worked in tandem, learning from one another, each reflexive moan and sigh of pleasure acting as a teacher. The silken steel of Benedict’s cock, the look of intense pleasure on his face, spurred her to greater heights: a slower stroke, a brief and teasing caress at the very head of his cock that made Benedict shiver and sigh against her lips.

Everything was hushed, urgent, intimate. The faint sound of raindrops somewhere far away, the cool, ivy-scented air; all of it heightened the lightning at the base of her stomach, making every curl of Benedict’s fingers even more wickedly pleasurable as she greedily took everything he had.

Far too short a stretch of time went by before something happened in her body. A deep, trembling jolt of sensation that pulsed tightly at her core, making her feel as if every joint and seam that held her together would fly apart without warning. A peak of pleasure that was almost frightening; she brought her other hand to the back of Benedict’s neck, holding him close as she stroked his shaft with a quick, frantic touch.

‘Benedict.’

‘Is something wrong?’

‘No. I—I feel something.’ It was impossible to put the exquisite tangle of feelings into words. ‘As if I’m going to—to come apart.’

‘Do you trust me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then keep feeling it, my darling. I promise what comes is worth the wait.’

‘I trust you.’ She needed his lips on hers, his fingers inside her. Only he could unravel the incredible knot of tension inside her; years of wants, needs, finally given voice by sheer desire. A violent thrill of pleasure stopped her tongue; she cried out, burying her face in Benedict’s shoulder, sure that she would die if the storm didn’t break.

Suddenly, everything shattered. White-hot, electric; a pleasure so intense it danced with pain, her body transcending borders that she hadn’t known existed. All that she could do was cry out, trembling, clutching onto Benedict so hard that they felt like one person instead of two.

‘Benedict.’ She didn’t know if she was begging or thanking him. She needed him to hear his name in her voice, to let him hear the ecstasy he had given her. Years of tension, a lifetime of it, broke in her; she blinked, unaccountably close to weeping as she reached her peak. ‘Benedict.’

‘I’m here.’ His other hand was at the nape of her neck, holding her close to him as he kissed her. He was trembling too; Bertha stroked him harder, needing him to feel the same intensity. Hot liquid splashed her hand; Benedict growled, the sound only heightening her own sensations. The edges of the room were beginning to swim—would she faint? ‘Oh, Christ. I’m here.’

He’s here. The thought grounded Bertha even as parts of her spiralled into ecstasy. She was held, she was safe; she could reach the stars and return to earth, securely tethered. *Thank God he’s here.*

The temple around them felt ancient. Timeless, somehow, as if they’d slipped through a fairy ring and found themselves in another world. Benedict sighed as he looked up at the roof, his hands behind his head, wondering when he’d come back to earth.

Maybe never. The force of what had happened here, what he and Bertha had shared, had moved something fundamental inside him.

He was someone different now. Perhaps a foolish thing to say, given that what he and Bertha had done was something that a thousand other couples had done a thousand times before, possibly this very day. But it wasn’t only that, as wonderful as it had undoubtedly been.

It was the letters. It was what he’d shared with her, the things he’d told her that he’d told no-one else in the world. It was the conversations they’d had: brief, yes, but revelatory. It was the sound of her voice, the shine in her eyes when she spoke of things she loved.

Something had happened to him. Something that had drawn a

firm line under everything he'd been before he'd met Bertha, and who he was now.

Bertha stirred beside him. Benedict made sure his coat was covering her, pressing his lips gently to her temple. 'Are you cold?'

'Not at all. But I like to be wrapped up.'

'I'll wrap you in my arms. There—is that better?'

'It's glorious.' Bertha sighed, her lips warm against Benedict's skin as she kissed the hollow of his neck. She was tight to him, a delicious tangle of cotton, linen, her smooth skin. 'Thank you.'

'Thank you.' Holding her was a privilege. 'Truly.'

This soft, intimate silence was even better. Holding her like this felt as though he was taking care of her, even if all he was doing was sheltering her from the cool breeze that occasionally moved through the temple.

'I don't know if we're wrong to have done this.' Bertha's murmur had no tension to it; it was as if she was commenting on the weather. 'Do you?'

'I don't feel as if I've done anything wrong at all, and I hope you don't either.'

'I didn't say that I felt wrong. I don't feel wrong. But if one considers the general morality of things, we've done something wrong.'

'I've never given much thought to the general morality of things.'

'Ah.' Bertha's soft laughter tickled his skin. 'Perhaps I should try that.'

'But I've given a lot of thought to you, and how much I wish to make you happy in every way I can. What we did, well—it was simply a way to make you happy.'

'I'm very happy. It worked.'

'Good.' Benedict kissed the top of her head. 'I'm happy too.'

He really was happy. Was that the fundamental thing that had changed? Rather than the shifting, rootless dissatisfaction that had dogged his heels for an unutterably long time, there was a contentment at his very core. A conviction, growing by the moment, that he had found his place in the world.

Next to Bertha Napp. Whoever would have thought it?

It was far too soon. Far too fast. But when the thought of all the dull hours he'd spent with women who he didn't give a fig for, playing the part of a rake when his heart wasn't in it, it didn't seem fast at all to feel so much. He'd been waiting to feel this much, waiting for such a long time that these sentiments were the end of a journey rather than the hasty beginning of one.

By allowing himself to feel this much for Bertha, he'd given himself the chance of a better life. A richer one, with books and

conversation and real pleasure rather than increasing terror of who he was becoming, who he was associated with.

He didn't want to scare her. She was so much more reticent than he was in her letters; he had given her as much of himself as he could, writing down every detail that he could think of. It had made him feel better, as if he were creating a structure around his sentiments, but so far she hadn't reciprocated.

Still. Lying here with her in his arms, the soft sound of rain beginning outside, the urge to tell her even a tenth of what he felt was almost impossible to ignore.

'Well.' He kissed her bare shoulder, breathing in the scent of her skin. 'This should come as no surprise, but I must see you again.'

'You're seeing me now.' Bertha looked up at him. 'Why must we already think of the future?'

'I don't wish to perturb you, but you make me think of the future.' He waited for Bertha to stiffen, to find some excuse to move away from him, but she didn't. 'Does that frighten you?'

'No. But—but we have known each other for such a short time.'

'Does it truly feel that way to you?'

'... No.' Bertha lowered her gaze, her voice little more than a whisper. 'It doesn't.'

Thank God. Benedict held his breath, joy filling him with such savagery that it almost pained him.

'Then perhaps I can make a more thorough presentation of myself.' He waited. Bertha didn't look up at him, but her breathing changed as he continued. 'My full name is—'

'Oh!'

'My full name is Benedict Harrow. My father is William Harrow, a gentleman who made his fortune in steel. Before I met you and took the full measure of my life, all I thought I would ever do was fritter away my father's money and consort with disreputable people. People who withered my soul rather than enriched it. I love hounds, dislike windy days, and wish to read through every one of the stories I loved as a child with you at my side.' Saying so much had left him breathless; he collected himself before continuing. 'And now, I'd like you to introduce yourself to me.'

'Must I?' She still wasn't looking at him. 'I've already given you Jane Smith. Allow me to be Jane Smith.'

'Bertha.' To use her Christian name now felt like a betrayal, but he couldn't stop himself. 'Please could we drop this act?'

It was as if he'd slapped her. Her face grew very white; she moved hurriedly away from him, drawing his discarded coat around herself. When she finally spoke, her voice was so quiet that Benedict had to lean forward to hear her.

‘You know my name.’

‘Yes, Bertha Napp. I know your name. Did you truly believe that after sharing a perfect moment with you, I wouldn’t do everything in my power to find out the name of such a bewitching creature?’

‘I asked you not to!’

‘No, you didn’t. You refused to tell me your name directly, which isn’t the same thing.’ He spoke as quietly as he could, but the fear in Bertha’s eyes chilled him. ‘But I couldn’t live without knowing the name of the woman who has changed my life so irrevocably, so profoundly, in such a short space of time.’

Bertha’s silence was almost unnerving. Despite a whisper at the back of his mind telling him that he was making a terrible mistake, Benedict went on.

‘I don’t know everything about you. I don’t know your mother or father, or your home, or the tiresome pieces of information that I would be forced to know had we met some other way. But I have read your letters so often that I know them by heart, every word, and—and so I know the things you loved as a child, the things you love now. Your dreams, your hopes.’ It was difficult to speak, but he carried on regardless. ‘I think I know you very well indeed. And I desperately want to know more.’

Had he ever made himself so vulnerable before? No, not once. He had never knelt in front of a woman and shown her his heart—Christ, he’d barely shown that he possessed a heart at all. He’d expected to feel a swell of triumph, but Bertha’s terrified expression left him with the most dreadful sense of confusion.

‘And I know about the letter to the papers.’ If he’d ruined things, he may as well ruin everything. ‘I read it. It was one of the most courageous things I’ve ever read.’

The silence was complete. Only the steady drip of water from the roof let Benedict know that this was still the world he’d been in a short time ago, travelling to the gardens with hope burning in his heart.

Bertha put her head in her hands. At first Benedict couldn’t tell that she was weeping; when he realised, pain lancing through him, he pulled her into his arms. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Let go of me.’

‘Bertha, I—’

‘Let go of me!’

Something had gone terribly wrong. Benedict moved away, holding up his hands.

‘My sentiments can’t possibly be this loathsome to you.’ He heard his own voice as if from far away, petulant, and struggled to correct it. ‘Unless I’ve been writing to someone else.’

'You have been writing to someone else.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'You've been writing to someone mysterious, and glamorous, and —and someone free of the chains that bind her. To be able to become that woman, to slip into her skin in order to speak to you... oh, it has brought me the greatest pleasure of my life.' Bertha's eyes were wet with tears as she raised her head. 'But it isn't me. Not really.'

'I've never heard such nonsense.'

'I'm thoroughly ordinary. An object of either pity or derision in many circles—I don't know the circles you move in, but I doubt I've ever been spoken of in an admiring fashion among the people you associate with.'

Benedict opened his mouth, then closed it again. Before he could recover, Bertha went on.

'You see? I'm correct. My reputation precedes me. This was meant to be separate from that—a way of breaking free of it, if only for a little while.'

'I don't want a little while. Not with you. I want a long, long time.' Panic and hope compelled him in tandem. 'I want a life.'

Bertha's eyes widened. She stared at him, drawing his coat even tighter around herself. 'A life?'

'Why not? I've never been happier than I am when I'm with you.'

'You've never had to be in public with me.'

'Because you haven't allowed me to be. Why won't you allow me to be? Do you really think I'd give a damn about what idiots think?'

'You're brave in this moment because you've never had to be before. Rich, well-looking, well-connected—this is the only battle you'll ever need to fight, and so you're confident of a sunny victory.' The fear in Bertha's eyes was powerful enough to send a prickle down Benedict's spine. 'I, who am used to both disappointment and failure, am not so sure.'

'You're writing a novel. You believe in a future even if you don't think you do.'

'And that novel is unfinished because I'm frightened of finishing it! You speak of a future—what future could you possibly want from me?'

'Anything!' This conversation had slipped away from him; now he was clutching desperately at whatever would keep her here, keep her with him. 'Whatever arrangement you see fit to have me in, Bertha. I can't lie and say I don't favour marriage—'

'Stop.' Bertha turned away from him, furiously re-arranging her gown and shift. 'Please.'

Every ounce of Benedict compelled him to reach out and take hold of her, make her stay with him somehow, but some piece of wisdom

deep within him restrained him. All he could do was sit still as stone, nausea rising as a sour taste in the back of his throat, as Bertha restored herself to her former decency until not a hair was out of place.

'I'm sorry.' She turned away from him as she stood. The anguish in her voice drained away any anger that Benedict felt, leaving a stark, hollow sadness. More sorry than you know.'

Benedict didn't reply. He stared bleakly at the cracked stone floor of the temple, unblinking, until Bertha's footsteps receded into the distance. Only when thunder sounded in the sky, the sound of the rain growing fiercer, did he come to his senses and run outside.

There were too many people nearby to shout her name. Too many mistakes made to somehow solve everything. He had been hasty, stupid, pushy—and now Bertha was gone, and God knew how he would get her back.

But he had to try. Even as rain soaked his skin, the sky an angry grey, Benedict was more sure than he'd ever been in his life.

God help him, he would try to make amends.

The fire was never large enough. Her father always had enough money for new stockings, her mother enough to add expensive lace trims to the hems of her skirts, but the fires were never built high enough in the house to stop Bertha shivering as she tried to read her book.

Perhaps she wasn't shivering merely from the cold. She bit her lip, turning a page, the sound of her mother embroidering a fire screen with some irritation mingling with the crackle of the flames. No matter how hard she tried to concentrate on the words, her mind and body had conspired to make even the simplest action seem impossible.

She had woken up late, and weeping. As rigidly as she had managed to control herself after the pleasure gardens, during sleep her true grief had shone through. A hideous, pitiless regret that felt like a hand around her heart, squeezing tightly with every beat.

She had preferred to indulge in a lie rather than reveal who she was to Benedict. Preferred to feign at being a glamorous woman of mystery rather than the dull, plain Bertha Napp who had declared to the papers that she would never marry. But Benedict had always known who she was, and he had liked her anyway, and—and she had been too frightened of that, too frightened of his intensity, and had shrunk away rather than seize the opportunity with everything she had.

What remained for her, now? How would she find joy without his letters, his conversation, his face?

'Bertha.' Her father's whining tone cut through every other sound.

‘You already represent a sunk cost in this household. If you insist on making the parlour more dreary with a miserable lack of smiles, comments, conversation, then your presence will begin to have even less worth.’

She had grown so used to this talk. By now she didn’t even feel the hurt it caused. But imagining Benedict listen to this—imagining him react to it—was as powerful as touching lightning.

Suddenly the cruelty of the words, the casual nature of it, was like being hit with stones.

‘Honestly.’ Her mother muttered as she finished an inch of embroidery, pulling the fabric savagely tight. ‘First that letter to the Mayfair Herald, then insisting on spending all your time on nonsense. Writing a book—as if you can write a book. As if book-writing would sustain you in the way a husband would. Now you have the nerve to mope about this house as if your good spirits have been stolen away in the night, pale as a ghost, refusing to eat like the most ridiculous of society misses when we all know that you barely have a place among civilised ladies and gentlemen anymore.’

How had she ever borne the weight of this abuse? Bertha blinked as if coming to her senses, the book’s words swimming on the page.

She put down her book. She fixed her gaze on her father, summoning up the courage to speak in a voice that didn’t waver. ‘How do you expect this to end?’

Her mother blinked. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘This... treatment. This constant castigation of my choices, my mistakes, my behaviour. This cruelty. No—you will let me speak.’ Bertha held up her hand as her father opened his mouth; shocked, his cheeks darkening to puce, he closed it again. ‘This unceasing criticism of everything I do, everything I say, everything I am. How is this meant to end?’

‘You can’t speak to us in this manner.’ Her mother half-rose out of her chair. ‘You won’t—’

‘I will. I’ll speak to you in this manner for as long as I need to. And it’s a simple question—how do you expect all this to end? This endless unpleasantness?’ Bertha leaned forward in her chair. ‘Do you wish me to die?’

‘Bertha!’

‘Because there’s little else to glean from your behaviour. Given that I have been such a disappointment—such a mistake from birth—it seems like the only logical solution. It appears that it would give the both of you tremendous relief.’

Her father seemed to have lost the power of speech. Her mother’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water; Bertha watched it, too far gone to care very much if her mother took another

breath or not.

‘Perhaps not death. Dying at one’s own hand is a sin, after all, and that would be difficult to explain to your friends. Perhaps you wish me to go mad—although Bedlam would be expensive, and it would be impossible to keep me at home given that you’d wish to host teas and card games, so I would end my days in some hideous provincial madhouse where people are half-drowned in cold water every day in an attempt to bring them to their senses. Yes, perhaps that’s the ideal outcome—or better yet, perhaps you wish for me to walk out of the front door one morning and simply never return. That way you wouldn’t have to go to the trouble and expense of either maintaining me or burying me. I could simply drop dead at the side of the road, out of sight, out of mind.’

‘Bertha.’ Her father’s voice sounded as if someone were strangling him. ‘Bertha, you—’

‘I should be careful of my tone? What I say? Why would I? Every impulse I have, every pleasure I take in anything—it’s never enough for either of you. It never has been. Your love and care has been entirely conditional, and—and now, after so much time spent living in the shadow of such treatment, I can honestly say that it neither frightens nor pains me.’ Bertha stood, her hands clenched tightly into fists. ‘Something in me is dead, now. You’ve killed it. I doubt it will ever come to life again.’

Her parents were silent. Bertha thought for a brief, wild moment of hope that her impassioned speech had broken through to them somehow, caused a tiny crack in their armour, but her mother’s expression was already one of porcine defiance.

Why was she trying to do this? Why was she serving her sentiments up on a plate to them, hoping against hope that they would finally take an interest in the inner workings of her soul, when time and time again they had shown at best disinterest and at worst, active malice?

Enough was enough. She had cut herself off from the marriage market and had suffered the consequences. She had attempted to escape into a world of romantic fantasy with Benedict and had been punished for her lack of honesty. If she kept trying to build a rapport with her mother and father that simply didn’t exist, she would unquestionably be punished in the future for her hopeless fighting against the current.

‘I’m going to go upstairs to my bedroom now, and I’m going to lock the door.’ She gently picked up her book. ‘I’m going to write a letter to my friend, the Duchess of Marton, and I’m going to request a room at the Marton Estate for as long as she sees fit to allow me to stay. If either of you attempt to stop me, I’ll throw myself into the

Thames—'

'Bertha!'

'I'll throw myself into the Thames, and you'll be forced to explain to the few friends you have left just why your daughter decided to commit such an atrocious sin.' An empty threat—she would sooner sneak aboard a ship bound for the Continent—but she was done sparing her parents' feelings. 'I hope you both enjoy your tea by the fire. I never intend to speak to either of you again.'

There was no response. In a way, there never had been. Not once had her father and mother truly responded to her needs. Bertha turned away, closing her eyes and willing away a rebellious tear, before walking out of the room and up the stairs.

She didn't bother listening on the landing to what her parents were undoubtedly saying about her. They didn't matter anymore—nothing mattered anymore. Nothing apart from getting out of this house as quickly as possible, and leaving her broken heart behind in London until she could think of Benedict's name, his face, without suffering the most intense pain.

She closed the door to her bedroom and went to her desk. She picked up her pen and pulled a fresh piece of paper from the drawer, her need to write so intense that she forgot to blot her pen before beginning. She wrote through the blots and occasional spelling mistakes, all need for perfectionism vanishing.

My dearest Arabella,

Home has become insupportable. I had so never wished to do this, but I must impress upon your hospitality—is there some corner of the Marton estate where I can hide myself away? I promise to be useful eventually, but due to a terrible affair of the heart I...

What to write? She couldn't very well tell her friend that she was suffering thanks to a broken rapport with a gentleman. She scored through her previous sentence and began again.

I do not feel well at all. In fact my spirits are thoroughly low, and my mother and father are as unsympathetic as you can imagine. I am in desperate need of a change of scenery, and can only tell you in no uncertain terms that I will repay your kindness in future.

Yours as ever...

She signed her name and sealed the letter with wax. Then she took another piece of paper from the drawer and placed it before her, struck at her complete lack of words.

Benedict,

I am so utterly sorry that...

No. She couldn't even begin to write down all the ways in which she was sorry. All the things that she wanted from him, the things that he had requested from her—they existed in a place beyond words now. It was all feeling, all a mass of sentiment, and she couldn't start picking through all of the separate parts to make something cohesive.

She was no sort of writer at all, then. If she couldn't make sense of her own heart, how could she possibly pretend that she was capable of making a fictional person's heart come alive on the page?

She reached down to the second drawer, unlocked it, and pulled out her manuscript. The sheer weight of it, the countless months of hard, consistent work, made her heart turn over in her chest.

It would all be nonsense. Every word. She should throw it on the grate and burn it—but she didn't have time. Not if she was to pack her things and make her way to the stables, where she would send the letter to Arabella by stagecoach to ensure that it arrived tomorrow morning and then sit in the library until the sun came up, paying the night-watchman the few coins left in her purse to ensure she was left undisturbed.

Under the bed would have to do. Bertha picked up the manuscript, reflexively stroking one finger over the front page, and went over to her wrought-iron bedspread. Biting her lip, she placed the pages on the floor.

Perhaps she should remove the ribbons that the manuscript were tied with. Let it be a loose bundle of pages that could be tossed to and fro by the wind, by the maid tomorrow who would come to clean her empty room. But something in her, something that couldn't quite be erased despite how many bridges she had burned that day, refused to unwrap the strands of yellow ribbon.

One swift kick should do it. She shot out her foot; the manuscript hit the back of the wall under the bed and lay still. For a moment Bertha felt as if she'd killed something, some innocent animal that hadn't deserved its fate.

No matter. So many more important things had died today. But as she began to pack her things, tears rolling down her cheeks, Bertha couldn't help but mourn for the book that never was.

Three days passed. Smoke rose from London's chimneys at the usual time, sellers walked the streets, then lamplighters. The plants in the squares flowered in the heat of the day, giving up the best of their

sent before shrivelling away to nothing in the dark.

Eventually, with a quickening pace and his hands clenched into fists, Benedict walked down the street where Bertha's family townhouse stood. The bookseller hadn't wanted to give her address, but enough notes and coins slid across the counter had eventually loosened the man's tongue.

He had often pictured Bertha's house while reading one of her letters. It would be a charming low-roofed affair, a cottage clinging to the outskirts of the city and alive with roses in the garden, possibly with a small carp lake at walking distance. There would always be the smell of something delicious wafting from the kitchen, and anyone who entered would find their shoes cleaned, their worries eased and a plate of something hot pushed into their hands.

Only that sort of environment could have possibly produced Bertha. A woman of such naturally generous spirit, such a delicate sensitivity, would have to have been treated both gently and carefully from birth. Benedict had absorbed this belief without ever truly examining it, allowing it to settle somewhere fundamental inside himself—which is why, when he found himself on the austere front steps outside Bertha's house, the effect was such a brutal shock.

Bertha couldn't have grown up in this grey, harsh place. This small, dull townhouse, identical to every other small, dull townhouse in the street. The cold that radiated from every stone, the gloomy look of the windows, the lack of warmth or luxury or even the faintest sense of comfort—no. Bertha couldn't have come from here.

But this was the address he'd been given, after finally throwing away the last of his pride and paying the damned bookseller. This was where Bertha had spent her childhood, her adolescence—all of her spirit, her boundless imagination, had come from here.

She was so much braver than he'd thought. That letter to the papers hadn't been the half of it. Benedict shivered, wrapping his scarf more tightly around his neck as he rapped loudly on the door.

A thin, sinewy butler opened it. He stared at Benedict as if he were an unusual specimen of moss. 'Are you expected?'

'Is Miss Napp inside?'

'Are you expected, sir?'

'I'm coming in. I don't care if none of them are home—I'll wait until they're back.'

'You can't possibly enter.'

'I'll give you thirty pounds.'

The butler's eyes widened. Benedict held his gaze, waiting for the man to break. Eventually, with a sigh that suggested he'd done this more than once, the man held out his hand. 'Very good, sir.'

'It's a good job I'm not a murderer.' Benedict shoved the bundle of

notes into the butler's hand, striding past him. 'Bertha? Bertha!'

No answer. God, the house was even more depressing indoors than it was from the outside; dark wallpaper, dark paintings, windows that seemed to reflect half as much light as was normal. The kind of cold that came from months of unlit fires—not due to poverty, but sheer meanness. Benedict stopped in the middle of the entrance hall, struck by the sheer ugliness of everything around him, until hurried footsteps broke him from his dispirited reverie.

'Why, I—what is the meaning of this?' An old man with a red-veined nose and stiffly folded cravat came towards him, his back straight and his eyes full of outrage. 'You enter my home without an invitation?'

'There was no other way of doing things quickly.' Benedict bowed; the man, shocked into routine, bowed back. 'I'm not here to plunder or pillage. I'm here to propose marriage to your daughter.'

'I... beg pardon?'

'Your daughter. I wish to marry her, and I need to have your permission in order to do so.' Benedict frowned. 'This is usually how such things are done.'

'Hortensia?' The man was calling over his shoulder, evidently so shocked by the news that more help was required to decipher it. 'Hortensia, come here immediately!'

A faint voice. 'Is something wrong?'

'Come here!'

Eventually a woman appeared, as straight-backed and rigid as her husband. She approached slowly, her features darkening into a frown as she saw Benedict. After a strained curtsy, she spoke sharply. 'What does this gentleman require?'

'For the third time, madam—I wish to marry your daughter. I'm rich, relatively kind, and intend to spend the rest of my life endeavouring to deserve her.' He'd never thought asking permission of his beloved's parents would be quite this much of a bore. 'So is Bertha here? I'll ask her now.'

The man and woman looked at one another. To Benedict's shock, followed by growing anger, both of them broke into disbelieving smiles.

'Forgive me.' He spoke as carefully as he could, trying not to let his instinctive rage creep into his voice. 'Is there something amusing about the situation?'

'Sir.' The man shook his head, wagging his finger at Benedict as if he'd almost manage to slip a joke past him. 'I don't know what my daughter told you she'd pay, or what service she said she'd perform, but I know when someone's pulling my leg.'

'Bertha.' The woman held a hand to her mouth, a burst of sly

laughter escaping. 'Lord, that scheming little—'

'Imagine! That grave little speech, for all the world as if we'd done something terrible, and all the while she'd planned this—'

'Pathetic, my dear, utterly pathetic—'

In that cold, startling moment, several things became extremely clear to Benedict. He backed away, unable to stop his nose wrinkling as if he'd come into contact with something rancid.

Bertha had grown up with these grotesque people as parents. She'd endured them every day, lived through assuredly worse behaviour than the display he was currently stood in front of, and had still manage to develop a character that set her apart as an example of grace and kindness. How she must have escaped into every book she read, every letter she wrote...

... Lord, how stupid he'd been to assume she'd change her hard-fought, hard-won character, her determination to remain single, for someone as utterly average as himself. He would have to do so much better to deserve her. Better than coming to this cold, sad house, asking these atrocious people for her hand.

He would need to be braver. But before he began, he would need to tell these people exactly what he thought of them.

'A fine joke, sir. A fine joke.' The man reached out to pat Benedict on the shoulder; Benedict shrank away. 'But time to leave. When Bertha comes back from wherever she's hidden herself, I'll take great pleasure in telling her this little scheme didn't work.'

'My goodness.' The woman giggled again. 'The thought of it. Bertha!'

If he wasn't very careful indeed, he was going to say something unforgivable. Benedict took a deep breath, trying to find the right line between justified anger and sheer rudeness—and then, with another burst of unstoppable rage, threw any idea of a line away.

'Evidently I came here with misguided ideas.' He stepped forward, drawing himself up to his full height; Bertha's father and mother both shrank backward. 'So we'll begin again. I'm going to marry your daughter, if she'll have me. Neither of you will have any say in the matter. I'm going to go to Bertha's room, now, to look for any evidence to help me find where she's gone—and if either of you try to stop me, so help me God, I'll hound you through the courts on whatever trumped-up charges I can think of until both of you are sleeping on the streets. Am I clear?'

If the astonished looks on both of their faces were anything to go by, he had been commendably clear. Holding out a warning finger, Benedict stamped his way up the stairs before either of them could stop him.

A few seconds of opening doors and peering inside brought him to

what had to be where Bertha slept. He stepped inside, staring, his heart sinking.

The room was as sad and bare as the rest of the house. What had they done to her—laughed at her whenever she had tried to choose a painting to put on the wall, or a brightly-coloured wallpaper that she liked? Made her feel so small, so utterly foolish for making even the smallest of decisions to satisfy her own happiness, that she had ended up living in a cold grey room by herself in a vain effort to appease them?

There was something under the bed. Benedict reached underneath, pulling out a pile of papers tied together with yellow ribbon. The singing brightness of it against the grey of the room let him know beyond a doubt that it was Bertha's, that she had managed to bring even the smallest amount of colour into this tomb of a house.

He stroked his fingers over the careful, flowing lines of ink.

Her manuscript. The one she had spoken of with such pleasure in her letters; the one she was making better, spending her time and energy and love on crafting it.

She had left it here. How sad would she had to have been to leave it here?

A wave of shame filled Benedict with such vicious force that he stopped breathing. He struggled for a brief, near-unbearable moment, the manuscript in his hands, before he held it tightly to his chest.

He had failed her. Failed her so completely that she had left behind her only way of escaping life's sadness.

He stamped back down the stairs, not bothering to look at Bertha's parents as he left the house. The butler, still standing by the door, deliberately averted his eyes.

Benedict spent a few minutes walking up and down the street, trying to calm himself. Every so often the rage would rise again, blinding him; he took deep breaths, attempting to quell the beast that had risen within him, but nothing would take away the sheer anger of those people having somehow produced Bertha.

He'd never cared this much about anything before. Life was something to be taken lightly; he'd flitted over the surface of things for much of his life, an amused observer, a partaker in pleasure without commitment. But now... now, to his astonishment, there was something that he cared about more than his composure.

Where would she have gone? He had to be patient with his thoughts, even as his baser instincts begged him to jump into his carriage and begin knocking on every door in London. If Bertha was truly as wounded as she'd looked the last time they had spoken, if she had come home only to have been treated with the cruellest indifference, where would she had gone to begin healing?

One of the girls who had signed that letter in the papers. The Unmarriageables. Benedict began frantically patting down his waistcoat pocket, gritting his teeth until he pulled out the ancient, creased piece of newspaper that he'd taken from the wall of the club and been carrying about with him for the past week.

Rose, Grace, Susan. She'd mentioned those names, but Benedict couldn't put them to any faces even with their surnames attached. He smoothed out the paper, trying to read the last name on the list.

Arabella.

Bertha had definitely mentioned an Arabella. Bothwell had mentioned an Arabella, hadn't he—Christ, what had he said about her? Had she collected a title?—but someone else had mentioned an Arabella too. Some wag at the club, a month or two ago...

That she-devil, bagging a duke by telling all and sundry that she would never marry! No longer little Miss Arabella Haligon, but the Duchess of Marton—she managed to cut herself free from the rest of the ton and make herself visible with that scheme. Gentlemen, we must be on our guard for ladies as devious as this!

The Duchess of Marton. Lord, he'd probably greeted her in passing at the same gathering where he'd met Bertha. The Marton Estate—a grand old property, staid inside, but with rather wonderful gardens...

... Bertha would be there. He didn't need to interrogate the certainty filling his chest; he knew it as a fact. She would have gone to the Marton estate, her romantic soul in need of both soothing greenery and friendship.

Now he knew what he needed to do.

The morning room of the Marton estate had previously been a staid, dull affair. His Grace the Duke of Marton, before his marriage to Miss Arabella Haligon, had been far too conservative in his tastes and far too attached to what the ladies and gentlemen of the ton would think of his wallpaper, his furniture, his fabrics—and so the room, despite its large windows and the fact that it overlooked the sculpture garden, had always been too acceptable to be truly exciting.

After his marriage, of course, much had changed. The scandal of the pairing, not to mention the sheer irresistible force of Miss Haligon's personality, had left the duke freer than he had ever been to choose what he liked rather than what he assumed everyone else would like. Colours had grown brighter by degrees, the pastoral paintings on the walls replaced with slightly more interesting subjects in newer, more daring styles of portraiture—and in a turn of events that had shocked every visiting lady and gentleman since, the worthy little Dresden porcelain shepherdesses and harlequins that had sat on every conceivable surface had been sent away and replaced with other

china creatures.

Frogs. There were an unusual number of porcelain frogs—and given that even one frog was an unusual number to have, the overall effect was startling to anyone who visited unprepared. The bright majolica vases were also a shock, as were the white Cycladic statues that stood, eyeless and with their arms folded, in the cabinets that had once held far safer objects.

Marton had discovered his interests. He had discovered that frogs, Italian ceramic art and ancient sculptures brought him far more pleasure than any china shepherdess ever had, and so his home had begun to fill with the things he loved—just as his estate was now a wild tangle of plants. And if he hadn't met Arabella, who had always been startlingly unconventional behind her façade of respectability, he never would have seen the limitless horizons beyond the borders of his dreary, confined life at the top of the ton.

'Darling.' He looked over the top of his newspaper at Arabella, who was fitfully embroidering beside him. 'Are you attempting to create something, or merely stabbing at the fabric?'

'Sometimes it feels terribly good to stab.'

'She'll be all right. I'm sure that with a little time, a little care, she'll be—'

'She didn't come down to breakfast. I practically had to drag her to dinner yesterday, and she barely touched anything apart from a mouthful of soup.' Arabella looked up at him, her eyes wide. 'And she hasn't read a single book.'

'She's only been here for one night.'

'For Bertha, that's very unusual.' Rose, one of Arabella's particular friends and a seasonal fixture at the Marton estate, nodded from her position by the window. 'She normally would have read at least two by now.'

'And where's her manuscript?' Grace, who had arrived with Rose in the carriage as soon as they'd heard news of Bertha's arrival, walked from the door to the fireplace and back again. Her pacing was insistent, full of nerves. 'I didn't see it with her.'

'Surely she can leave her manuscript for a day?'

Grace, Rose and Arabella looked at Marton, their stares full of withering scorn. Marton opened his mouth, thought better of it, and hid behind his newspaper.

A shadow fell across the intricately patterned rug. Arabella looked up from her embroidery, biting her lip as Bertha passed by the window. She was walking through the sculpture garden, apparently concentrating on nothing but the pavement in front of her, her wan face so utterly different from her usual placid, ruddy good health that Arabella couldn't help but wonder if there was a physical cause for her

behaviour rather than the sentimental one they all suspected.

Alas, their suspicions were very probably accurate. How else to explain the letter that had arrived from Bertha two days ago, full of blotches and spelling mistakes that she never would have made if she were in her right mind, all but begging to come to the estate and stay for a little while? And there had been that crossed-out sentence that Arabella had been able to decipher, despite the harshly-scratched ink lines covering it—something to do with *an affair of the heart*.

Bertha didn't have affairs of the heart. Not real ones; she saved all of her sentiments for her manuscript. Who on earth had caused her to fall into this frightening dejection?

'I simply don't understand it.' She stabbed at her embroidery with even more vigour. 'Bertha, of all people—over a gentleman!'

'Perhaps not.' Rose's voice was hopeful, but her eyes lacked the same optimism. 'We don't know that with complete certainty.'

'It must be. She would never be this upset otherwise.'

'I can't help but agree.'

'But what can we do for her?' Arabella caught Marton glancing at her out of the corner of her eye, his face full of knowing humour. 'There's no need to look at me like that.'

'Like what?' Marton innocently folded his newspaper, his expression still indescribably smug. 'I'm not looking at anyone in any particular way.'

'You are. You have that unconscionably superior look that I thought our marriage would effectively stamp out.'

'Superior? Never. That would imply some privileged information on my part. Some insight that has escaped the rest of you.' Marton's pause was short, but potent. 'But you have to admit, it is a little funny—'

'I knew it!'

'It is a little funny that after boldly proclaiming your lack of desire to marry in one of London's most prominent papers, you married me within the year—and now Bertha appears to be suffering some romantic crisis.' Marton shrugged, the smile on his face seemingly designed to be irritating in the extreme. 'I'm sure you're magnanimous enough to admit that, my darling.'

'I'm certainly not.' Arabella frowned. 'I'm petty in the extreme.'

'I know. It's one of your most charming qualities.'

Arabella looked at Grace and Rose, mutely begging them for help. Instead of finding supportive expressions, Rose was nodding in agreement with Marton while Grace was unsuccessfully concealing laughter. 'Oh, you two!'

'Oh, don't punish me for agreeing with a factual statement!' Rose threw up her hands, a burst of laughter transforming the worry on her

face. 'He's correct. Ever since we put that message in the paper, gentlemen have begun to crawl out of the woodwork like lice.'

'How lovely to be compared to lice.' Marton opened his newspaper again. 'Such industrious creatures.'

'It's true. You've married, and Bertha's sadness is definitely due to a gentleman... it's as if we challenged Fate herself to find us suitable husbands.'

'I wouldn't call my darling husband all that suitable.' Arabella tried to glare at Marton, but her smile ruined the effect. 'Not at this particular moment.'

'It's true.' Grace stopped her wandering about the room, staring briefly at the fire. 'Something does seem to have been set in motion.'

'Nonsense.'

'Not nonsense, Arabella. A different kind of sense. It... it rather makes one wonder who will be next.'

Just as she finished her sentence, the door creaked open. Grace turned, startled; a gentleman was standing on the threshold, bespectacled, carrying a sheaf of papers in his hand.

'Excuse me.' The man seemed as startled to see the assembled company as Grace was to see him. 'I—I needed Marton for a moment.'

Grace, not knowing what else to do, pointed at Marton in his chair. 'There.'

'I know.' The man paused. 'I can see him.'

'I know.' What on earth had possessed her to point? 'But... but to make sure.'

The man nodded as if her foolish reply had made sense, then turned to Marton. 'Do you know where the chapel records are kept?'

'In the cherry-wood desk, Thornfall.'

'Cherry-wood. Thank you.'

The man had a small spot of ink on one of the knuckles of his left hand. Grace pondered it for a few moments before realising what she was doing with a jolt of shock. She half-turned away from the man, pretending to examine the fire once more—but the gentleman was speaking to her again.

'If I'm unsuccessful in locating the desk, feel free to come and point at it.'

'Beg pardon?'

'If I can't find the desk.' The gentleman paused. 'Seeing as you helped me locate Marton.'

Quite a funny joke, really, and one that Grace was completely incapable of responding to with her usual wit. She settled for a strained nod, which seemed to make the gentleman on the threshold as uncomfortable as she was.

'Well.' The man bowed awkwardly; Grace and Rose curtsied

while Arabella gave an affectionate nod. 'Perhaps I'll see you all at dinner. Then again, perhaps not.'

'If I don't see you over the next day or so, I'll send a maid in with some potted meat and a candle. Possibly a rope, to dig you out of the books.' Marton smiled. 'Happy labour.'

The man smiled, then quickly walked away. As the door closed, Grace turned to the rest of the room's occupants—only to find them all staring at her in a most unexpected manner.

'What?' She folded her arms. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing.' Rose paused; her silences could be as expressive as her words. 'Nothing at all.'

'Something clearly has. You're all staring at me as if I've grown a second head.'

'Well, it's—it's interesting.' Arabella glanced at Marton, whose face was firmly hidden behind his newspaper. Despite not being able to see him, Grace was oddly sure that the man was smiling. 'That you were asking who would be next to unexpectedly marry, and then—'

'And then what?'

'And then having such a nice little conversation with Mr. Thornfall.' Arabella could look horribly angelic when she was plotting something. 'That's all.'

'We didn't have a conversation. I pointed at your husband like a fool, even if His Grace and Mr. Thornfall are of long acquaintance.'

'Very long acquaintance.' The newspaper twitched a little as Marton spoke. 'All our lives, in fact. He's a wonderful man in many ways.'

'I see.'

'Loyal, steadfast. A little too inclined to spending all of his time indoors, but—'

'Well then. If that's the case, you can all stop this scheming immediately.' Grace spoke more rapidly than she wanted to, her heart beating strangely fast. 'Because I could never possibly look twice at a gentleman who doesn't indulge in every outdoor pastime available.'

'That's true.' Rose's shoulders sagged a little. 'You are so frightfully hearty, dear.'

'As a horse.' Grace folded her arms. Quite why the image of Mr. Thornfall was still clear in her mind, all angles and height and tousled hair, she couldn't say. 'So enough of this, please.'

Her tone was harsher than she would have wished. Rose gave a surprised nod and began to examine the window-frame, while Arabella turned back to her embroidery. Marton's newspaper didn't move again; after a few slightly awkward minutes, the room returned to its customary calm.

Bertha's shadow fell across the rug again. Her pace had slowed;

now she was wandering amidst the ivy-covered sculptures as if she had woken up and found herself there, lost in a strange land. Grace watched her walk along the leaf-strewn path, her heart aching in sympathy with her friend.

She couldn't be as vulnerable as Bertha had been. Not even as vulnerable as Arabella had been, come to that; there had been a marriage at the end of it, but that had been more luck than judgement. Arabella could just have easily had ended up alone, a lonely spinster rather than the defiantly happy unmarried woman she had always wanted to be—and all of it over a gentleman!

She would never succumb. Her name had been under that letter sent to the papers, and it would remain there. However many gentlemen there were in the world—even the gentlemen with spectacles and broad shoulders and surprisingly kind faces—she would be an Unmarriageable for the rest of her life.

She looked up again, as did Arabella, Marton and Rose. Carriage wheels had sounded on the drive.

Arabella really had done the most marvellous job with the garden. Bertha tried to count each and every bloom that now flourished in the sculpture garden, from the ivy curling about the heads of the stone nymphs to the roses that had been placed at the entrance to the long walkway, but stopped after twenty-five or so. Her brain rebelled against any number higher than that—was rebelling against anything short of the simplest thoughts, and she knew better than to try and test it.

It was because she hadn't had any sleep. Or any food, short of a few forced forkfuls at dinner under Arabella's orders. Perhaps when she had managed to sleep properly, when she succeeded in eating an actual meal from beginning to end, this cloud of despair would lift.

Or not. She reached the end of the walkway, looking up into the stone face of the weeping woman that had been placed at the entrance to the kitchen gardens, and turned around.

Without writing every day, it was as if she had lost a limb. Or some vital organ; something that stopped her living in the same way that she always had, leaving her infinitely more vulnerable to every breeze, every glance from a stranger, every minute change in the weather. But going back to retrieve her manuscript from her parent's house was impossible, talking to her mother and father while she was in this state was impossible—everything short of waking, dressing and walking was impossible.

Thinking about Benedict was somewhere beyond impossible. Bertha closed her eyes, breathing in the memory of him, then winced as a rose petal blew against her face.

She should stop this nonsense. Even if her soul was that of a pale, dreamy romantic, she was far too physically sturdy to do this and not be embarrassing. She should go into the house now, find something useful and productive to do—there would be sewing to do, watercolours, something—and attempt to do something at dinner that wasn't staring sadly into her soup.

'Bertha?'

She had to have dreamed the voice. Sometimes that happened; the sheer force of her imagination conjured things up with such vividness that it was as if her characters spoke to her, argued, begged. Bertha blinked, shaking away the thought.

'Bertha!'

No dream. How could it not be a dream?

She turned. Leaning awkwardly against a stone centaur, holding a bulky shape in his arms that she recognised, was Benedict.

'I... I brought you your manuscript.' He took a step forward. Bertha forced herself to stand her ground. 'I think I brought every page with me.'

'You—you went to my home?'

'Yes.' The sad kindness in Benedict's eyes told Bertha everything she needed to know. 'I did.'

There was no way to reply to him. No way to accept, even with a nod, that he had seen the most unpleasant part of her reality. Bertha half-turned, holding a hand to her face in a vain attempt to hide the tear now sliding down her cheek.

'I understand why you didn't want to tell me who you were. Or at least, I can make an attempt at understanding it. And I understand if—if you cannot forgive my cruelty.'

'Your cruelty?' She couldn't keep silent. 'You weren't cruel.'

'I can only disagree.'

'If you've met my mother and father, then you've met people for whom being cruel comes naturally. I've developed a sense for it—an ability to know if someone has an aptitude for cruelty, before they even open their mouth.' Bertha paused for a moment, steadying her breathing. 'And you may be capable of many things, including no small quantity of anger, but you are incapable of true cruelty.'

'I'm not sure about that. After speaking to your parents for more than a minute, I felt more than capable of being cruel to them.'

'They are... special cases. And although I know I should feel love for them—that it is my duty to love them—I must confess that I—'

'You owe no-one your love. No-one at all. Not even me, however biased I am when it comes to this particular matter.' Benedict's voice was low and husky as he approached her, the passion in his eyes so evident that it left her feeling dizzy. 'People should endeavour to

deserve your love.'

'People have never endeavoured to deserve my love.'

'Your friends do. I know that without ever having met them.

Anyone of good heart who meets you would do nothing else but work to deserve you—your kindness, your friendship, your excellence.'

Benedict's voice shook. 'And although I can only truly speak for myself, I know that I will work every day of my life to deserve even the swiftest glance from you.'

'Benedict, I—'

'I don't mean marriage. I should never have mentioned it. I should have allowed you to proceed at your own pace, your own time—'

'Please hold me.' The entreaty was little more than a whisper. 'If you don't, I'm afraid I'm going to fall.'

He was with her in a moment. His strong arms were around her; he took the weight of her as she leaned against him, suddenly exhausted at the pretence of being able to carry on alone. His lips were on her cheeks, her hair, kissing her again and again as he cradled her, his throat full of soothing sounds that made Bertha want to sob.

'I love you.' If she didn't say it now it would be left unsaid forever. 'And I'm sorry that I wanted to be someone else. Someone better. I—I was trying to protect you from how utterly ordinary I am.'

'You are incapable of being ordinary, and I love you too. All I want to do is love you, Bertha. In whatever manner you choose.'

'I—I choose to accept your love, and love you back with the same strength.' How miraculous it felt to say those words. 'I do.'

Benedict's gaze softened. It was as if what she'd said had removed years from him, given him a youth and vitality that Bertha felt shining on her like a newly discovered sun. The kiss that came, deep and potent, made her feel as if she had grown wings.

She'd been brave. She had told the world what she wanted, told Benedict what she wanted, and she had been rewarded.

Could she be brave enough to go a step further?

'And...'

'Yes?'

'And when I refused marriage in that letter to the papers. I refused a certain type of marriage. The kind that is merely a transferral of property from one set of hands to another—the kind where no love dwells, and very little kindness. The kind of marriage that my parents have endured. I believe it has twisted them, contorted them like the roots of a tree, and I want no part of what they had done to themselves. Absolutely no part at all.'

'Bertha, you know that if we were to marry we wouldn't—'

'I know. I do know that, now that I allow myself to think properly

about it.' Oh, Lord, more bravery. 'And... and if we were to discuss it as a possible idea, I would be much more willing to consider—'

'I'm not going to discuss proposing to you as if we were business partners deciding where to put a shop.' Benedict withdrew. 'You do understand that?'

'I understand that you must have concerns, doubts—'

'Bertha Napp, you deserve to be proposed to properly. You don't have to take on the work of being proposed to as if the proposer is doing you a favour!'

'I—I've never seen it that way before.'

'Allow yourself a modicum of the grace and goodwill you extend to the world at large.' Benedict took a few steps backwards. 'Please.'

'What are you doing?'

'Please.'

Bertha blinked, covering her mouth, as Benedict got down on one knee.

This couldn't be happening. Not here, in the wildly romantic surroundings of the sculpture garden. Not Benedict, the most handsome, good-hearted man she had ever met. Not—not her, the completely unremarkable Bertha, who preferred to write about life rather than live it.

But here she was. Here he was.

Perhaps she wasn't that unremarkable after all.

'Bertha. I know that our period of association has been relatively brief, even if the letters we've written and the things we've discussed have given us more knowledge of one another than people who have known their husbands or wives for a lifetime. But I've discovered my higher, better self with you. A happiness that I'd never imagined finding—a contentment that could span worlds. And if you feel even an inkling of that same happiness, which I suspect you do, would you do me the honour of—'

'Yes.' It probably wasn't done to kneel down too, but she was doing it. 'Yes.'

Benedict's hands were shaking as she took them. His kiss was white-hot, as if it were something sacred.

'Well?' Grace's irritated voice broke through the reverie. 'Can we come out, or not?'

Typical Grace. Bertha burst into laughter, glancing shamefacedly at a shocked Benedict as they both rose to their feet. 'I see we have observers.'

'Oh, Lord.'

'Don't worry. They're nice—sometimes.'

'That doesn't help.'

'Can we invite them to come here? Otherwise they're going to

keep staring from the windows.'

'Of course they can come out.' Benedict paused. 'How many of them are there?'

'Grace, Rose, Arabella, her husband. Possibly servants, although I don't think they're all that interested in our affairs.'

'Well?' Grace's voice could carry terribly far when she wanted it to. 'Can we?'

'Yes.' Bertha couldn't help smiling again. Benedict looked slightly frightened, but it was good for him to be exposed to nearly all of the Unmarriageables at once. Then they would go to see Susan, and then she would meet Benedict's family, and—and oh, the future was suddenly as ripe and flavoursome as an apple, ready to be bitten into. 'You can.'

She took tight hold of Benedict's hand as Grace, Rose, Arabella and the Duke of Marton walked out into the sculpture gallery. All of her friends had expressions which exactly matched their deeper personalities; Grace looked incredibly knowing, as if she'd understood all along how this would end despite not having the slightest bit of information, while Rose was clapping her hands with excitement. Arabella had an almost embarrassed look on her face, underneath her clear happiness—no doubt she was wondering just how the letter to the papers, her lofty ideas of remaining single, had ended with two of them getting married before two Seasons had passed.

The Duke of Marton looked as if he wished the ground to swallow him up. Without even glancing at Benedict, Bertha knew that his expression would be much the same.

'My darling.' Grace ran to Bertha, enveloping her in her arms; Bertha let go of Benedict's hand in shock, embracing her friend. 'Do you feel better now?'

'Immeasurably.'

'And you'll begin writing again?'

'Of course. My fingers are already itching for my pen.'

'Good. It's going to be a masterpiece.' Grace broke away from Bertha, only to look at Benedict with considerably more severity. 'And you, sir.'

Benedict bowed. 'Madam.'

'If you were responsible for Bertha's misery over the previous day, then I can only feel the greatest coolness towards you.' Grace folded her arms; Bertha tried to catch Benedict's eye, but he was staring at her friend in outright fear. 'However... if you are now responsible for her happiness, than said coolness can be amended to cautious neutrality.'

'... Thank you?' Benedict blinked, bowing again. This time Grace curtseyed in response. 'Are conversations always this—'

‘Unusual? Yes.’ Rose stepped forward, curtsying with considerably more goodwill than Grace had done. ‘But the advantages outweigh the downsides. At least, they always have for us.’

‘And now that my friends have finished terrifying you, I must extend the hand of welcome.’ Arabella smiled; Bertha felt Benedict relax. ‘Welcome, sir.’

‘I should have come to the house. I should have made a formal introduction.’

‘Formality isn’t the strongest of my suits, despite my station—best that you didn’t.’

‘My only defence is that I love Bertha very much.’

‘Wonderful. So do we.’

It was happening. It was happening despite the sheer impossibility of it all; love, friendship, acceptance. A way of living her life away from the cruelties of her parents—a way that was no compromise, but instead a life beyond her wildest dreams.

Bertha closed her eyes, unable to take it all in.

She had done it. Against all odds, she had made a happy ending.

THE END

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